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'Gaddafi should have been put on trial'

Ed West meets Cardinal Renato Martino, the outspoken former Vatican official who still has a seat in the front row of history

When I meet Cardinal Renato Raffaele Martino, president emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, he has just been in Westminster Cathedral for the royal investiture of the Order of St George's grand master, Prince Carlo of Bourbon Two Sicilies, Duke of Castro, and the sub-prior Archbishop George Stack of Cardiff. The guest speaker at the royal gala dinner later on was Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, to which Mary McAleese of Ireland sent formal greetings. It was a rather big event.

The order, or to give it its full title, the Sacred Military Constantinian Order of St George, was founded in the mid-16th century by the Angeli Comneni family, Italian descendants of Byzantine Roman Emperors, under a bull of Pope Clement VIII, and decrees from the King of Spain and later the Holy Roman Emperor. Today the 7,000-strong order is heavily involved in various projects supporting the Catholic faith, and in helping charitable and humanitarian endeavours around the world.

The cardinal's role, as he puts it, is to "help the members of the order to fulfil their duty as Catholics and as members", a fitting position for this energetic, well-connected and experienced 78-year-old prelate.

And the order is in extremely good health at the moment, having just expanded to Argentina and growing in other parts of Latin America. There are also requests, he points out, to enter the order all across Italy.

The cardinal was slightly delayed for our meeting, and I later find out it was because he wished to visit the Passage, the homeless charity in Victoria, one of the many initiatives which the group supports around the world.

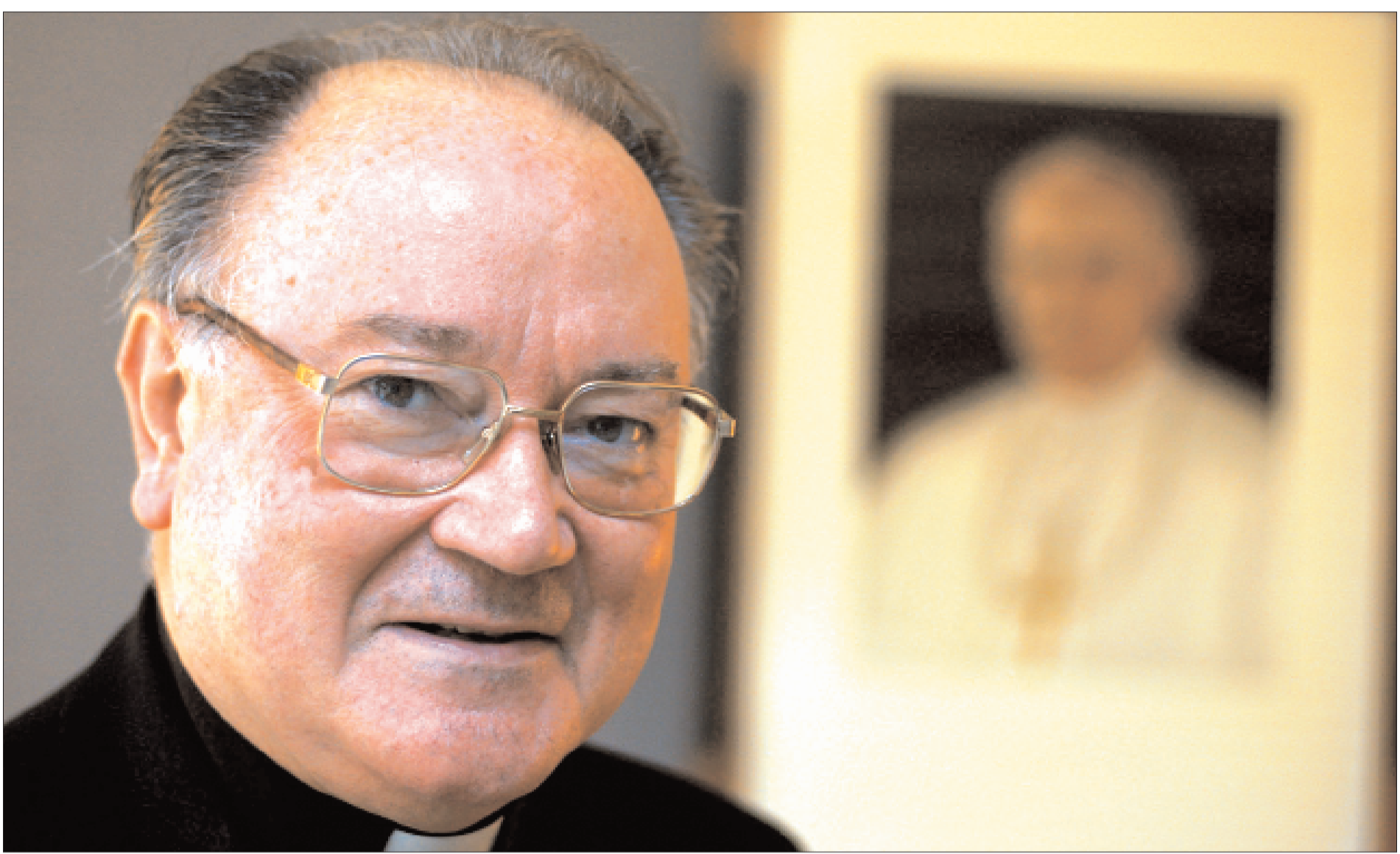
Born in 1932 in Salerno in Campania (Italy's shin), Renato Martino was ordained in 1957 and, having studied canon law, entered the diplomatic service of the Holy See in 1962. And so began a half-century career that would send him to countries as diverse as Canada, Brazil, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Laos, Thailand and the United States, where he was the Permanent Observer to the United Nations from 1986. A speaker of five languages, he forms part of that polylingual elite of the Holy See that tries so hard to bring humanity to the table to break bread, even if humanity often seems more intent on breaking legs.

Over a very interesting period, the second half of the Cold War and the start of the new era of civilisational conflict (or whatever this age will be called by posterity), the cardinal has been very much at the front row of history, if not on the stage himself. At the UN he was on duty during the 1989 US invasion of Panama, when the pockmarked dictator General Noriega took refuge in the Holy See embassy, and was driven out by American forces playing heavy metal music. Two years later, in what might be seen as the first war of the new era (it was the conflict that radicalised Osama bin Laden and led to the formation of al-Qaeda), Martino was heavily involved in Vatican efforts to prevent the Gulf War. That effort, alas, came to nothing.

"John Paul II tried everything to avoid war," he recalls now. "He was calling me personally by telephone, in order to see what UN was doing."

"I was going to see secretary-general Pérez de Cuéllar at the time. The dramatic moment was when Pérez called me one day and told me: 'Sorry, archbishop, all our efforts were in vain. Tomorrow the war will start.' It was a Wednesday. I think. So I had to tell the pope. I called him, and said: 'Tomorrow the war will start.' He was very serene, he said: 'OK, we tried what we could'."

Later the then archbishop participated in the famous 1992 UN Conference on the



Cardinal Martino had to tell John Paul II that his efforts to avert the Gulf War had failed. 'He was very serene,' the cardinal recalls CNS photo by Chris Sheridan

Environment in Rio de Janeiro, and two years later was prominent in demanding a safe haven for Tutsi refugees in Rwanda. That year he also represented Pope John Paul at the International Conference on Population and Development, defending the Church's pro-life stance against largely hostile American-European governments. In October 2002 he was made president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and became a member of the College of cardinals the following year, and later still put in charge of the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerants.

Around that time the Cardinal, as well as the rest of the Holy See, was vigorously lobbying against the second, larger invasion of Iraq by the United States and Great Britain. This time, of course, the fall-out was far greater, especially for the country's Christian minority, which was soon driven out by sectarian fighting. He also campaigned against the death sentence handed down on Saddam, which was carried out in December 2006, and which did nothing to calm the cycle of violence in the country.

be the same? The cardinal gives a concerned shrug, in that rather Italian gesture suggesting resigned pessimism.

The whole Middle East, of course, is in an uncertain state right now, with Tunisia on the brink of an Islamist government, Egypt being uncertainly ruled by the military and Syria ripped apart by violent repression. How will the Christians fare as a result of the Arab Spring? Is it true that 100,000 Christians have already fled Egypt this year?

"We cannot say what is happening with the Copts," he says, "but I have been many times in Syria when I was in Lebanon in the 1960s. The problems there are for everybody, not just for Christians."

President Assad's father, Hafez Assad, dictator from 1971 to 2000, "was respectful of the Christians", Cardinal Martino says. Indeed, as Alawites, a sect that celebrates Easter and drinks wine at their rituals, the family are dismissed as "little Christians" by Sunni Muslims. But "every dictatorial regime is the negation of freedom. This is something that must change."

The cardinal adds: "You know in eastern Europe they

During my 16 years at the United Nations I have worked a lot on that."

Much of the Vatican's lobbying work, of course, is done behind closed doors,

including obtaining the release of 15 British servicemen taken hostage by the

Iranians in 2007 and set free just before Easter that year. Is the Holy See lobbying

for the release of Youcef Nadarkhani, the Iranian Christian pastor sentenced to death for apostasy (even though he has never claimed to be a Muslim), a matter which many feel the Catholic Church has been silent over.

"Yes," he says, and then smiles. "I had many of these cases during my 40 years as a diplomat of the Holy See and eight years of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace."

"I hope to have the time to write some of my memories, of things that I have seen personally, because I think that [an understanding of] some events in the world would be helped if everybody knows what happened. Like this particular case: everybody agrees. The interest of the Holy See is nothing else but for more peace. We don't have colonies. We don't have any divisions, material interests, products to promote here. That is why we intervene only to promote peace and understanding."

And after all these years of working for peace, how is he enjoying retirement? He laughs. "I'll tell you what my retirement is. Tomorrow I go back to Italy. Next week to New York at the United Nations – Ban Ki-moon is good friend of mine – and I come back after a few days and go to São Paulo, and then to Thailand and from Thailand to Myanmar [Burma]. I'm almost 80 years old, but I don't show that."

At that, he smiles and prepares himself for the next engagement.



Cardinal Martino with Prince Carlo of Bourbon Two Sicilies and his wife, and Archbishop Antonio Mennini

The cardinal says his role is to help members of the Constantinian Order 'to fulfil their duty as Catholics'

On the day we meet Libya's hated dictator Muammar Gaddafi has just suffered a far more brutal and hot-blooded fate, and while few mourned the passing of his rule, how does this make the cardinal feel?

"I regretted that they killed Gaddafi," he says. "I wanted to hope that this wouldn't have been the end. He could have been judged at an international tribunal, for which I worked for many years. This would have been the right way to judge him."

The death penalty, he says, is "a state crime". "You punish a crime with another crime. You don't resolve anything with violence."

The death of Saddam led to even more violence. Might the death of Gaddafi

changed, thankfully without too much violence." Alas, many fear that countries like Syria will more closely resemble Yugoslavia than Czechoslovakia.

The Syrian crisis, of course, is ultimately less problematic than the neighbouring Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Cardinal Martino was heavily criticised three years ago for comparing Gaza to a concentration camp. All he will say today is that he supports the current campaign for the United Nations to recognise Palestine as a state.

"They can have dialogue as a pair, as equals, as states," he says. "We are [committed] to the understanding, the recognition of Palestine, of dialogue."



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