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Ola Källenius, CEO of Mercedes-Benz, presents the key for the new all-electric popemobile to Pope Francis during a meeting at the Vatican Dec. 4. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Pope Francis received a fully electric Mercedes-Benz popemobile on Wednesday (Dec. 4), which combines his concern for the environment with the comforts required by a nearly 88-year-old pontiff.

Vatican journalists were escorted inside the Vatican, passing through a parking lot with still-wrapped electric car charging stations, as the city-state continues in its effort to achieve zero emissions. Francis, sitting on his wheelchair, met with 15 members of the creative and directive team of Mercedes-Benz, which has been a key provider of popemobiles for the Vatican for almost 100 years, though this is the company's first fully electric offering.

The immediately recognizable popemobile required hundreds of hours of manufacturing and about a year to make. "Every detail is perfection," said Ola Källenius, CEO of Mercedez-Benz, pointing to the papal crest emblazoned on the vehicle.

"The pope will travel with zero-emissions aboard the new Mercedez-Benz in time for the 2025 Jubilee, an event that only occurs every 25 years and for which millions of pilgrims are expected to come to Rome," read the statement issued by the German luxury carmakers on Wednesday.

The statement also underlined that the new popemobile "contributes to the realization of Laudato Sì'," Francis' 2015 "green" encyclical centered on the importance of caring for creation. The new model was created in close collaboration with the Vatican and was highly personalized for the pope's requirements.

Since becoming pope in 2013, Francis has opted for simplicity even in his choice of vehicles. He followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, who was the first to introduce electric cars in the papal garage. In 2020, Japanese bishops gifted Francis an eco-friendly Toyota Mirai, and in 2022, Toyota gave the Vatican one of the few hydrogen-powered vehicles on the market.

The new popemobile is a Mercedez-Benz G-class, maintaining its classic design despite the necessary custom modifications. It has four electric motors that can be quickly recharged, and it can travel up to 30 mph. The new model already has the traditional Vatican City State plate, SVC1. The color is, of course, pearl white with matching keys.

The vehicle also provides comforts that can aid the pontiff, who suffers from sciatica pain. The back of the car has been made easily accessible, and the white chair in the back can swivel, allowing the pope to easily greet people on both sides.

"The chair is heated and there is a handle in front of it that is heated as well," explained Marc Langenbrinck, president of Mercedes-Benz Italia. Dimming lights have been placed beneath the roof. Manufacturers designed the platform on the back to accommodate the Swiss Guards' boots. The popemobile also includes two seats behind the pope where his bodyguards usually sit. Of course, it provides appropriate space for the pope to invite children and people into the popemobile, as he often does during his Wednesday drive through the crowd at St. Peter's Square.

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Popes didn’t start using cars to greet the crowd until the 1960s. In the past, pontiffs used the "sedia gestatoria," a hand-carried throne that was last used by Pope John Paul I in 1978. The connection between popes and cars was made in the U.S., when the archbishop of New York gifted Pope Pius X an Itala 20/30 in 1909, even though it was seldom used.

Pope Pius XI favored Mercedes and even bought one himself. In 1930, he was gifted a lavish Citroën Lictoria Sex, with gold detailing, a silver roof and hidden compartments. It also included an image of St. Christopher, patron saint of drivers.

Pope Paul VI first used a Lincoln Continental to greet faithful during his visit to New York in 1965, but it was the now St. Pope John Paul II who was the first to use the now famous popemobile, though he said he did not like the term, telling reporters it was "undignified." The first model, a Toyota Land Cruiser, was built in 1979 for his visit to his native Poland and finally completed when he visited Germany the following year.

After an assassination attempt on John Paul II on May 13, 1981, the popemobile went through many modifications to improve its security, including the insertion of bulletproof glass. The appropriate popemobile for any occasion is selected by the Roman Curia, depending on safety and weather concerns, and it must be fully inspected by the pope’s Swiss Guards.

When the pope travels to a foreign country, local organizers prepare the appropriate popemobile in accordance with the Vatican’s demands.

Francis asked that the barriers and bulletproof glass surrounding the popemobile be removed after he became pope. Mercedes-Benz officials would not comment on the security measures included in the new popemobile or its overall price.

The popemobile used by Francis during his visit to the United States in 2015, a Fiat 500L, was recently auctioned for over $50,000. Paul VI gifted his 1964 Lincoln Continental to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who auctioned it to raise funds for charity. India’s first Formula 1 driver, Narain Karthikeyan, drove the popemobile during the 2024 Mille Miglia race Dec. 1-7 in the United Arab Emirates.

The Vatican did not share when the new popemobile will be inaugurated, but the company expressed its hope that it would become a recurring feature of the pope’s audiences soon.