



Pope Paul VI rides in a Mercedes-Benz 300 d Pullman Landaulet (W189) on his return to Rome from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Jordan in 1964. (RNS/©Mercedes-Benz AG)

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A new Vatican exhibit celebrates nearly 100 years of one of the world's most recognizable cars: the popemobile. From brocade seats to electric motors, the eight historic vehicles on display trace the history of how papal transportation went from stately limousines to more practical cars designed to give crowds a view of the pope.

"Over the decades, the popemobile has evolved from a means of transportation into an instrument of encounter, enabling the pontiff to draw closer to the faithful during pastoral visits and public celebrations," Pope Leo XIV told organizers of the exhibit during a private meeting at the Vatican on Oct. 28.

"In this way, your work has helped facilitate the church's mission of reaching out to people and bringing a message of faith, hope and charity to the world," he said.

"[A Century of the Popemobile](#)," which will be open to the public until Jan. 28, doesn't tell the story of every popemobile but focuses on the relationship between Mercedes-Benz and the papacy. The German car manufacturer gifted Pope Pius XI a black Nürburg 460, a limousine with a large seating area, for the pope in 1930. It had a single seat, upholstered in fine silk brocade, with woodwork finishes.

Before Pius XI, popes had self-isolated within the Vatican for nearly 60 years following the capture of Rome in 1870 and the end of the papal states. Only when Pius XI agreed to the Lateran Pacts with the new Italian kingdom, establishing the sovereignty of Vatican City, did the papacy end its period of confinement — and it did so with a new look.



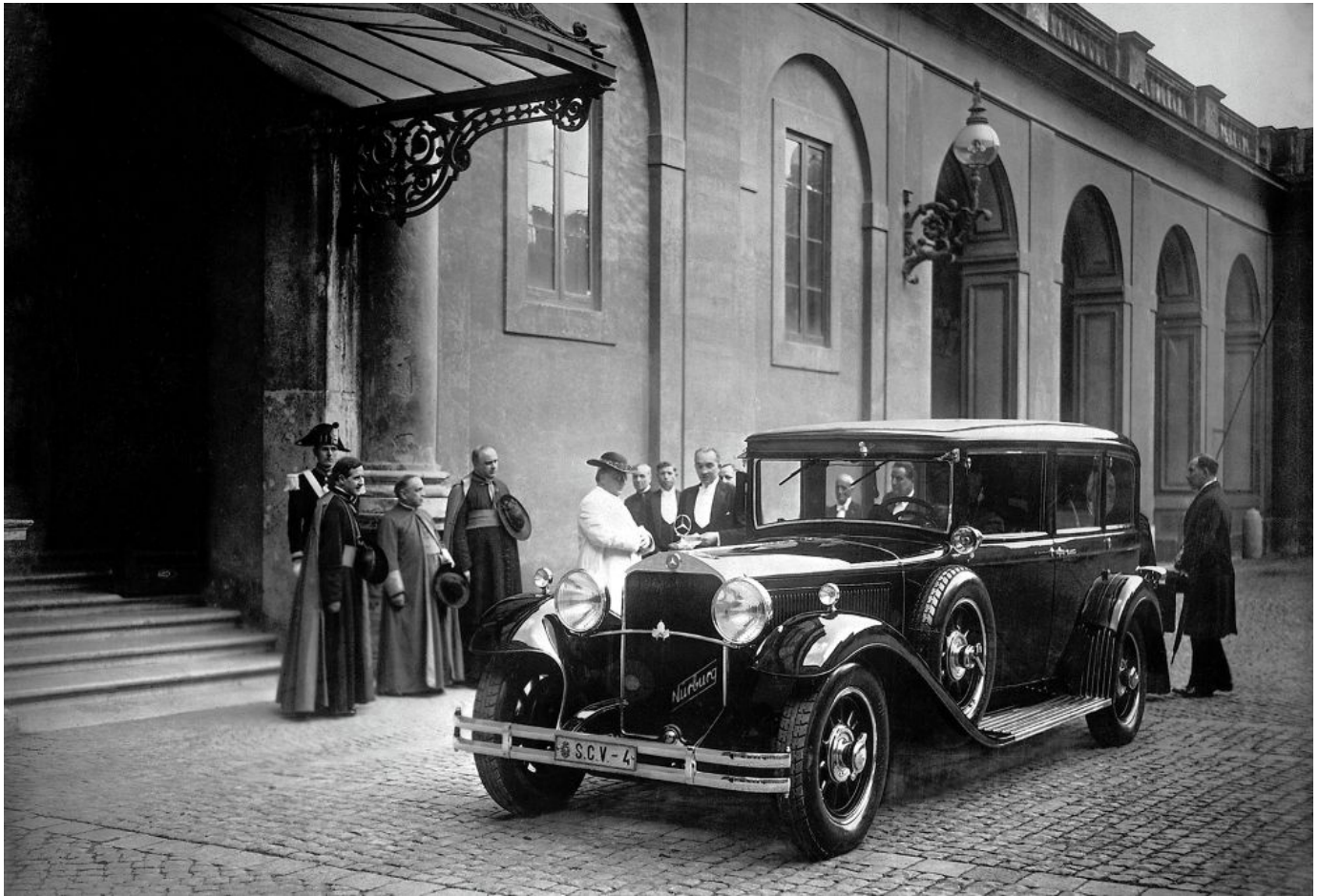
Historic papemobiles are displayed in a new exhibit at the Vatican Museums. The exhibit will run until Jan. 28. (RNS/©Governorate of Vatican City State, Directorate of Museums and Cultural Heritage)

In 1965, Mercedes-Benz gifted a specially built 600 Pullman Landaulet to Pope Paul VI. It had a movable seat in the rear, wide doors and an intercom to communicate with the driver. Most importantly, it had a folding roof over the rear passenger seats, foreshadowing the papal cars of today.

But papal transport was still very much an isolated ride until 1980, when Mercedes developed the 230G for Pope John Paul II's visit to Germany. The vehicle was pearly white and had an elevated papal compartment beneath a large, transparent Plexiglass dome. The design made the pope visible from afar and radically changed the way people experienced papal appearances.

The glass dome was meant to grant visibility and protection from the weather, but not security. Only after the assassination attempt on John Paul II in 1981 did Mercedes add bullet-resistant glass and other safety precautions.

"Over 100 years, each pope has received a popemobile from Mercedes-Benz and used it as a vehicle of dialogue, as a vehicle of sharing and blessing and seeing the people and traveling," Barbara Jatta, director of the Vatican Museums, said in an interview with RNS.



Mercedes-Benz gifted a Nürburg 460 (W08) to Pope Pius XI on May 23, 1930.  
(RNS/©Mercedes-Benz AG)

Other models in the exhibit show how popemobiles coexisted with traditional limousine-style cars during papal trips and events. The 2012 M-Class gifted to the German pope, Benedict XVI, added improved lighting and air conditioning and made it more compact for air travel.

Although it is not part of the exhibit, the next major change would come under Pope Francis. In December 2024, Mercedes-Benz gave the author of the "green" encyclical *Laudato Si'*, for the care of creation, its first fully electric popemobile. To adapt to the aging pope's needs, the car also had a heated seat and handrail.

"The exhibition offers an opportunity to reflect on the remarkable advances in automotive technology, as well as the deeper significance of the journeys undertaken by the Successors of Peter," Leo said in his speech.

The exhibit is located in a glass pavilion in the Vatican Museums' Giardino Quadrato, near the Carriage Pavilion and the Pinacoteca art gallery.

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