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Mercedes to unveil new eco-friendly popemobile

by Niels Sorrells by Religion News Service

BERLIN -- Pope Benedict XVI has a lot of ground to cover when he heads back home to Germany this September, but thanks to a new popemobile from Mercedes, at least 30 of those kilometers (18.5 miles) will be on the greener side.

The Vatican has contracted with Mercedes for the first-ever hybrid popemobile, according to a report by business magazine *Wirtschaftswoche*. Citing company sources associated with the top-secret project, the magazine reported that the vehicle, based on Mercedes' M Class, would come with both a battery and a gasoline engine.

It was never considered, according to the report, to resort to an entirely battery-powered car since security threats require the pope to always have the option of a quick getaway.

The new hybrid engine would allow the popemobile to go 30 kilometers (about 18.5 miles) purely on battery power, which would require a one-hour plug-in charge. The car reportedly runs on a lithium-ion battery and a 60-horsepower hybrid engine.

Mercedes has been providing vehicles for the Vatican for eight decades. The iconic popemobile was first used in the 1980s, when Pope John Paul II yearned for a vehicle that would let him have closer contact to people during his overseas visits.

Neither the website of Mercedes, nor its parent company, Daimler, made any mention of a possible new hybrid popemobile.

September's four-day visit is Benedict's first official state visit to his native Germany since ascending to the papacy in 2005, though he has visited privately several times.

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