

Pope Benedict XVI slapped with charges for not wearing seat belt

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Pope Benedict XVI arrives in his popemobile to lead his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on Sept. 28. (CNS Photo/Alessia Pierdomenico, Reuters)

BERLIN -- Just because the pope gets to ride in the popemobile doesn't give him license not to wear a seat belt.

So says an unnamed German man who filed charges against Pope Benedict XVI for allegedly failing to use a seat belt while touring Germany on an official visit in September.

Attorney Christian Sundermann confirmed that the complaint was filed with authorities in Freiburg, the southern German city that was Benedict's last stop during his German visit, according to the newspaper *Der Westen*.

The unnamed plaintiff, from Dortmund, argues that the pope was seen several times during the visit without a seat belt. The complaint offers several eyewitnesses, including the archbishop of Freiburg, the head of the German Conference of Bishops and the premier of the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg, where Freiburg sits.

The complaint refers to a "Mr. Joseph Ratzinger" -- the German-born pope's given name -- and sightings of him on Sept. 24 and 25 riding in a vehicle without a seat belt "for more than an hour."

Sundermann's office has also entered a YouTube clip of the visit, which shows Benedict touring in a German-made Mercedes-Benz popemobile without a seat belt, as possible evidence.

The pope's German citizenship has prompted some questions of whether he would be subject to German law, or whether he enjoys diplomatic immunity as the head of a foreign state.

If found guilty, the pope could face fines of between 30 and 2,500 euros (\$40 to \$3,340), depending on how many counts of which he was found guilty, the paper reported.

Both the attorney and the plaintiff have said this is not an attack on the church, but rather an effort to raise awareness of the seat belt law and increase enforcement.

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