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Blessed John Paul's popemobile put on display at Vatican Museums

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — The white open-air jeep Blessed John Paul II was riding in when he was shot May 13, 1981, was taken out of storage and put on display in the Vatican Museums' newly revamped Popemobile Pavilion.

The move wasn't meant to sensationalize the tragic event or turn it into a sideshow, but to highlight the car that has become "highly symbolic" of that fateful day and help people "reflect on the value of life and everything John Paul did," said Sandro Barbagallo.

Barbagallo, an art critic at the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, was the driving force behind restoring and reopening the Museums' permanent exhibit of historic modes of papal transport. The grand opening took place Tuesday, the 34th anniversary of Blessed John Paul's election as pope.

The underground exhibit, which houses more than a dozen ornate papal carriages and nine papal cars, had been open only sporadically over the years. Deciding to put the 1980 white Fiat Campagnola on display was the impetus to re-launch the space and keep it open to the public to showcase its other transport treasures of the popes.

Some gems include:

- The very last Volkswagen Beetle to roll off the production line in Mexico. The light teal 2003 Bug with whitewall tires was donated to Blessed John Paul in 2004 to thank him for visiting the country in 2002.
- The steering wheel of a Ferrari Formula One racing car donated to Blessed John Paul in 2005 by the car-maker's president, Luca Cordero di Montezemolo. An accompanying plaque honors the

pope for his "26 years in the pole position on the roads of humanity."

- An immense six-horse-drawn Gran Gala gilded carriage whose wooden wheels are more than five feet high. It was built around 1826 for Pope Leo XII.

But when horse-drawn carriages started giving way to automobiles, the Vatican was slow to follow.

Archbishop John M. Farley of New York gave an Itala to Pope Pius X in 1909.

The pope refused to accept the newfangled contraption, saying he preferred the "clippity-clop" of horses pulling his Landau carriage to the "chugga chugga" of a gasoline engine, Barbagallo told Catholic News Service.

A car would have been useless at the time anyway, since a dispute with the Italian government over the sovereignty of the Holy See kept popes confined inside the tiny Vatican City from 1870 to 1929.

When the 1929 Lateran Pacts finally allowed popes to go freely outside Vatican City walls, Pope Pius XI became the first pope to put the rubber to the road in a Detroit-made Graham Paige.

The auto-producing Graham brothers donated the vehicle to the pope, who used it for the very first time he or any pope was able to leave the Vatican in nearly 60 years.

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It was also used by Pope Pius XII when he went to visit Rome's San Lorenzo neighborhood to comfort residents in the wake of a deadly U.S. bombing raid of the area in 1943.

The exhibit also includes the first official white "popemobiles." The first white off-road open-air vehicle used by a pope was a 1976 Toyota Land Cruiser used periodically by Pope Paul VI. That was followed by the 1980 Fiat Campagnola, a 1983 Land Rover Santana and a 1990 Mercedes-Benz 230.

Currently, the papal fleet has three cars that carry the pope: two black sedans and a white Mercedes-Benz popemobile, Barbagallo said.

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