

Italian car-parts maker hosts eco-friendly popemobile design contest

VATICAN CITY - A select group of young international designers will be submitting innovative mock-ups of what an eco-friendly popemobile should look like.

For the first time, the annual Autostyle Design Competition will have a special category for a popemobile, according to L'Osservatore Romano, the Vatican newspaper. The vehicle design must meet standards for low-emissions, as well as the Vatican's safety and security standards, it said.

Out a pool of about 200 candidates, a commission will choose 12 student finalists who will then have seven to eight months to create a new popemobile design, said Sara Ferraccioli, marketing and communications officer for Berman, the Italian car-parts manufacturer sponsoring the competition.

A panel of judges, including design directors from Audi, Bentley, Fiat, Ford, Ferrari, Maserati, Nissan, Toyota and the University of Florence, will pick the winners "based on their coherence with (a major carmaker's) brand, their originality and innovation, the comprehensiveness and elegance of the work and the feasibility of the projects," according to cardesignnews.com.

The final winners in the three categories of sports car, SUV/urban cars and popemobiles will be selected at the competition venue near Mantua, Italy, in October, Ferraccioli told Catholic News Service.

She said the idea to add the popemobile category to the 2012 contest happened after Berman's CEO, Roberto Artioli, got the go-ahead from a friend who is friends with Salesian Father Giuseppe Costa, head of the Vatican publishing house.

"They thought it would be a great idea," she said.

The Vatican publishing house, LEV, will publish a volume of the competition's best "green" popemobile projects and designs.

Pope Benedict XVI's vocal concern for protecting creation has inspired a number of environmental initiatives at the Vatican under his papacy from the installation of solar panels and solar collectors to implementing recycling programs and plans to boost the use of electric vehicles.

In June, the Vatican confirmed reports that Mercedes-Benz was making plans for an energy-saving papal hybrid car that could be used at home or abroad.

On papal trips, Pope Benedict is usually driven in a white Mercedes popemobile with bulletproof glass.

Vatican officials have said that the pope, who is committed to saving energy at the Vatican, would welcome an electric vehicle as a symbol of his support for measures that promote energy sustainability.

However, an electric vehicle still would have to meet the Vatican's safety and security standards for a popemobile. Because the popemobile is bulletproof, the car would be heavier than most electric vehicles and it would have to have fast acceleration in the event of an emergency.

A hybrid vehicle, on the other hand, has both an electric motor and a gasoline engine.

The Vatican has said its aim is to use renewable energy sources for 20 percent of its energy needs by 2020, the target date set by the European Union for its members.