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Ford Focus the Brand Vehicle of Pope's Humble Car Message?

Francis Says Flashy Cars Hurts His Heart

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Pope Francis

Does Ford have a friend in high places? Pope Francis is using a Ford Focus compact as a Popemobile to get around Vatican City. That could provide a global marketing boost to the automaker and its Focus nameplate, said experts.

The Pope advised new priests and nuns to travel in more "humble" vehicles rather than driving fast, late model cars.

To prove his point, Pope Francis is driving a low-priced Focus around Vatican City, according to news reports.

Scott Monty, Ford's global head of social media, said via e-mail that the former cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina appears to be using a "second-generation" Focus instead of a new model.

For Pope Francis, it's yet another contrast with predecessor Pope Benedict XVI, who had a custom-made electric vehicle donated by Renault and a BMW X5 given to him as a gift by the German auto maker.

The Focus is anything but a luxury car. With a U.S. starting price of \$16,310, Ford markets the vehicle as a fuel-efficient alternative for consumers looking to save money in the showroom and at the gas pump.

As such, the Focus is a perfect brand for the Pope to send his austerity message to the Catholic Church, said Gary Stibel, CEO of the New England Consulting Group.

'Smart' car

"This is a smart car for a smarter Pope," said Mr. Stibel. "It's a simple, real car for a real humble Pope. Clearly Ford does benefit from this because he's chosen their car."

Michelle Krebs, a senior analyst with auto consultancy Edmunds.com, said the free product placement can't help but boost Ford, particularly in Europe where auto sales are still recovering from the global economic recession.

"The European auto industry is in such bad shape, the nuns could help out an autoworker by buying any new car. And Ford would be thrilled to provide them with all the Focus cars they want, I'm sure."

The sight of Pope Francis tooling around in a Focus, Ms. Krebs said, also gives Ford more marketing ammo in its ongoing debate with rival Toyota about which company makes the world's best-selling car.

With over 1 million in global sales, the Ford Focus beat the Toyota Corolla for world's best-selling car in 2012, according to sales tracker R.L. Polk & Co. But Toyota publicly challenged the research firm's numbers saying it didn't count Corollas sold under different model names.

"The Ford Focus is the best-selling car in the world, so it's not surprising to see so many people around the globe who love the car," said Ford's Mr. Monty.

On Saturday, Pope Francis told a group of future priests and nuns to avoid the fastest cars and fanciest cell phones and live a more humble life.

"It hurts my heart when I see a priest with the latest model car. If you like the fancy one, just think about how many children are dying of hunger in the world," said the pontiff.