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From poor to pope, 1984 Renault has seen it all

Megan Fincher | Sep. 12, 2013 The Francis Chronicles

Pope Francis is putting a new spin on what it means to be the pope as he continues to put the poor in the driver's seat.

"A car is necessary to do a lot of work, but please, choose a more humble one. If you like the fancy one, just think about how many children are dying of hunger in the world," Francis told a group of young religious visiting the Vatican in July, according to a Reuters report [1].

So is it really a surprise, then, that Francis traded his Ford Focus for an even more humble 1984 Renault 4 on Saturday?

The media reported every detail of the new popemobile, but the story of the car's donor has gone largely unnoticed. It seems likely Francis accepted the Renault because he identifies with the car's legacy rather than simply admiring the Renault's vintage charm.

The Italian Catholic magazine *Famiglia Cristiana [2]* reported that Fr. Renzo Zocca of Verona gifted the vehicle to Francis. The story was written in Italian but translated into English at *NCR*.

Zocca, 69, started his career as a parish priest, but 25 years ago, he felt a calling to minister on the margins of society. His parents had just died, so he took his teenage brother with him to one of Verona's tough, working-class neighborhoods, rented out a flat and offered Mass in a shed.

"Fr. Renzo fought barehanded against drug dealers who were ruining the lives of the younger members of his flock and sent him death threats. But he carried on, even after being stabbed," *Vatican Insider [3]*reported [3].

Zocca was actively involved in the life of his neighborhood, even serving as chaplain for the local soccer team, Hellas Verona Football Club. In 1985, the team unexpectedly won the Italian championships, and the club's vice president gave Zocca a celebratory gift: the Renault 4.

With a car, Zocca had the ability to branch out his ministry. After assessing the needs of Verona's impoverished suburbs, Zocca founded the social cooperative Àncora [4] in 1985. To this day, Àncora offers assistance and jobs for those in need.

"No pacification effort will bring lasting peace, harmony and happiness for a society that ignores and leaves its people on the periphery," Francis told the World Youth Day crowd [5] in Brazil in July.

That message struck a chord with Zocca, and after some reflection, he decided to share his life story with Francis.

"I wrote him a letter asking to meet him. I wanted to tell my experience. But I wanted to make him a gift. A gift that would witness my experience. And what better gift than my R4?" Zocca told *Famiglia Cristiana*.

Driving around to serve the poor, the elderly, the drug-addicted and the disabled put nearly 200,000 miles on the Renault. When Zocca wrote to Francis, the beloved car had been relegated to the garage.

About a month after sending him the letter, Zocca received a phone call from the pope.

"I told him I wanted him to have the car. 'Are you sure?' he asked me. 'Do you really want to give it to me? Wouldn't it be better to give it to the poor?' " Zocca told *Vatican Insider*. "I told him that that car had already done a great deal for the poor and that it was now time it went to the Pope and in the heat of the moment I raised my voice without meaning to."

Did Zocca's passionate plea convey to Francis the deep significance of the Renault? That it wasn't just any car, but a tool that had served countless people on the margins? At that moment, did Francis remember his own plea to the aforementioned young priests and sisters?

After Zocca assured Francis he indeed had another car to use, Francis accepted the offer. Knowing Francis' environmental activism, Zocca proudly told *Famiglia Cristiana* that the Renault can run on biofuel.

Taking 50 parishioners with him to the Vatican, Zocca had the honor of driving Francis in the Renault for the first time.

"Four of us got into the car: I sat in the driver's seat, the Pope in the passenger's seat, and Stefano, my mechanic, and my assistant, Luigi, sat in the back. 'Go slowly, we're in the Vatican!,' Stefano said. The speedometer read 30 Km/hr [18 mph]. I cannot tell you how excited those fifty parishioners were to see the R4 arrive and the Holy Father get out," said Zocca, according to the *Vatican Insider*.

When it was time to leave, Zocca's parishioners were thrilled to see Francis hop in the driver's seat, but he admitted to *Famiglia Cristiana*, "Those security next to me were very concerned because they had realized that from then on he would go around the Vatican in my car. However, I left snow chains in the trunk."

The world's parish priest most likely knows how to use them.

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