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Rome, December 11 (RHC)-- The Catholic Church has apologized to parents after a bishop in Sicily told a congregation packed with children that "Santa Claus does not exist," and that the modern Father Christmas was invented by the Coca-Cola company.

"First of all, in the name of the bishop, I express my regret for this declaration which has generated disappointment in the smallest children," the Italian press quoted Don Alessandro Paolino of the Diocese of Noto as saying.

Don Paolino's apology came after Bishop Antonio Stagliano left some young churchgoers upset this week by telling them point-blank that Santa Claus was not real. "I would add that the red color of his coat was

chosen by Coca-Cola for advertising purposes,” Stagliano said, claiming that the company uses the wholesome image of Santa to “depict itself as an emblem of healthy values.”

Bizarrely, Stagliano’s words were uttered during a festival that culminated in a re-enactment of the arrival of St. Nicholas to the Sicilian town of Noto on horseback. As such, his words reached many local youngsters, and parents reportedly took to social media to vent their frustration with the bishop. Some accused him of hypocrisy for slating Santa while insisting on the existence of “the son of the virgin and the holy spirit who walked on water,” the Times reported. Others compared the bishop to the Grinch.

However, Stagliano stood by what he said. Amid the outrage, he claimed that he wanted children to forget about Coca-Cola’s depiction of Santa and focus on the true historical origins of Father Christmas – Saint Nicholas. “If Santa is St. Nicholas, children will be more open to the idea of helping each other, to the idea of solidarity that comes from giving gifts to poorer children,” he stated. His sermon, he said, was “a way of doing pop theology and recovering the true meaning of the Christian tradition of Christmas.”

Saint Nicholas, who lived in modern-day Turkey in the third century, inspired some of the traditions we now associate with Santa Claus. He is said to have thrown coins in the window of a poor family’s house, and anonymously distributed food to the hungry. His legend inspired the Dutch tradition of ‘Sinterklaas’, which in turn became the English ‘Santa Claus’ -- who was depicted wearing various outfits until Coca-Cola popularised his red and white getup in the 1930s.

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