NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Mea Culpa -- and a spoiler alert

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| Jan. 29, 2013
Distinctly Catholic

I have an apology to make. In last night's debate, we were discussing secularization in the West. I was making the obvious point that such a complex phenomenon as secularization could not be attributed in any facile way to the growth of the modern welfare state. After all, in 1789, there was no Medicare. And, in 1929, Walter Lippmann published "A Preface to Morals," in which he wrote of the "acids" of modernity which not only attacked particular beliefs, but the disposition to believe itself, four years before the New Deal.

But, during that discussion I also pointed to the way we experience death in the modern age, and how that is the kind of thing that leads to secularization. I noted the way our culture does not even like to mention the word "death" in the face of death, so our condolence cards and our obituaries never say a person "died" or mention death only in euphemisms. Death now often comes after a long, sustained illness and treatment, not suddenly and at too young an age. Conversely, one hundred years ago, a significant number of women died in childbirth. And, there I made my mistake. I did not announce "Spoiler Alert," I merely gave as an example the fact that a character had died the night before on "Downton Abbey." There were audible gasps in the hall from those who had not caught the previous night's episode and had videotaped to watch later. I am profoundly sorry for spoiling the suspense.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/26/2014 - 04:52*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/mea-culpa-0