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The expression "new normal" has increasingly felt like a meaningless phrase. With each new shift in the experience of the novel coronavirus pandemic, what we thought we knew had to be relearned and what served as guidance or best practices often had to be re-scripted. Normalcy suggests consistency and predictability, neither of which has been experienced since March 2020.

The result has been widespread fatigue and impatience, which might explain the rise in public outbursts and misbehavior as people attempt to reintegrate into public life.

And yet, things are beginning to feel different this time as the surge of infections caused by the Omicron variant of the virus peaked and has steadily and rapidly declined across the United States. Meanwhile, some parts of Asia are now dealing with their own Omicron outbreaks and pockets of rising cases in Europe continue to remind the world that this disease is not just going to disappear.

Nevertheless, public health officials tell us that we may be moving closer to an endemic phase of this viral nightmare, which offers the promise that COVID-19 may no longer dominate our lives in the way that it has.

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On a personal level, I have noticed how things have been shifting, sometimes rapidly. Before the start of the pandemic I would often travel several times a month to lecture or lead workshops and retreats. During the first year of the pandemic I never stepped foot on an airplane, bus or subway car. For the first three months of the pandemic, I remained within a 5-mile radius of my friary, reaching that distance away only when I went running by myself.

Like millions of other people who were not categorized as frontline or essential workers, I became unwittingly cloistered, working and socializing remotely from home through Zoom and other technologies. I taught all my courses online, visited with family over Zoom, participated in "virtual happy hours" with friends and delivered dozens of lectures or workshops from the same chair in front of my computer.

Last spring, after being fully vaccinated, I boarded a plane for the first time in a year to visit my family in New York. I felt a sense of hope that perhaps the light at the end of the tunnel was in sight. But then a year of rising anti-vaccination sentiment, Delta and then Omicron waves of infections and roller-coaster-like mask mandate instructions and in-person gathering guidelines dimmed the brightness of what we had hoped could be a "new normal."

But here we are today, and something does feel different. While I am still occasionally meeting or presenting virtually, most speaking engagements are taking place in person and with minimal or no social distancing in venues. Masking in some settings is still common, but decreasingly consistent. Larger gatherings of people are more commonplace.

For example, I just returned home from the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress, which ordinarily is one of the largest Catholic gatherings in the United States with tens of thousands of participants assembled annually at the Anaheim Convention Center. While in-person attendance this year was only several thousand, which was noticeably lighter than usual, it was a joy to be with so many people in the convention rooms and exhibit hall to pray, learn and socialize. Everyone I spoke with was excited to be back and looked forward to next year’s gathering, hoping that it would return to its typical size as the pandemic continued to ease up.

Experiences in recent weeks that in many ways resembled those of pre-pandemic times have me thinking about what it means to live in another "new normal," one that I pray may usher in a safer and less-stressful time for all. Adjusting to this return of regular in-person activities and more-frequent travel has given me reason to step back and reflect on what is needed in order to cope better with the world as it changes. Here are some of the things I have been thinking about.

Patience. While Thomas Aquinas argues that the virtue of patience is not technically the "greatest" of the virtues, in the age of pandemic — and this liminal period of pandemic-toward-endemic — patience may be the most important virtue. People are tired, worn down, frightened and approaching reentry into social and public life with understandable trepidation. The hardship and suffering that this pandemic has wrought does not justify treating other people with disrespect, but the circumstances can help explain why so many people are less tolerant and exercise less restraint on personal bad behavior.

We need to consciously remember to be patient with others and ourselves as we continue to adjust to changing circumstances. As a frequent traveler before the pandemic, I believe I cultivated a practice of forbearance and patience that served me well in the course of the many small and large inconveniences and frustrations that come with being so itinerant. However, as I've eased back into traveling more often again, I have noticed ways that I feel more easily irritable and annoyed. What was once second nature is now a virtue in need of practice and cultivation.

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Humility. I need to recognize that this pandemic has and continues to exert a noticeable toll on me as it does on so many others. It is OK to do less, to take one's time, to recognize that just as it was not easy to stop the whole world in March 2020, it is not easy to restart it now. Working on humility means owning my limitations and acknowledging the impacts of the last two years of challenge, loss and suffering, while also accepting that there are long-term consequences that will manifest in various ways.

Empathy. In many ways, this characteristic flows from both patience and humility. I believe that a lot of the disrespectful behavior we have been witnessing in public arises in part from a lack of empathy. Everyone is dealing with these challenging times differently. We have to remember that we may not know others' burdens, sorrows or suffering, and so we should treat everybody with love and understanding. Something as simple as remembering that others are also going through hardships can make a major difference.

Trust. This pandemic has made even the most trusting person suspicious of others, if only as potential vectors of COVID-19. This skepticism has combined with the conspiracy theories and nonsense of the disinformation age, resulting in widespread distrust of others in general and public authorities in particular. But in order for us to move toward a better way of living and being in the world, we need to build back our sense of trust.

Flexibility. If there's one thing that the pandemic has taught me, it is that I need to be more flexible. The luxury of sure plans and inflexible schedules is a thing of the past (if they ever existed). One thing that appears over again in the gospels is Jesus's ability to respond to whatever and whoever is before him with grace and hospitality, including during unpredictably stressful times such as when thousands needed to be fed (Matt 14:13-21, Lk 9:12-17). How are we adjusting to changing circumstances?

These virtues and characteristics are not a panacea for all that we continue to face during these challenging times, but they may help us to navigate the uncertain road ahead in a manner reflecting our shared Christian vocation.