

# From the Chapel – May 12: Return to normalcy



*[“From the Chapel”](#) is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.*

The people of the United States were fed up. Years of war and a global pandemic had wreaked havoc in their lives. In the midst of a presidential election year, all they wanted was for things to return to the way they had been. One candidate understood that desire.

His name was Warren G. Harding, and the year was 1920. As the Republican candidate for president of the United States, Harding chose the phrase “return to normalcy” as his campaign slogan. He won the election, and the rest is history.

Harding’s slogan is one of those rare things that cause cross-disciplinary battles in academia. Most English majors deride the word normalcy as a neologism (except, of course, for those descriptivists who argue that the only rules that govern language, grammar and spelling are the ways in which people actually use them). Meanwhile, political scientists – who, you can tell from the way they write, couldn’t care less about the English language – find in Harding’s campaign a powerful political lesson: People may want change, but the change they covet most is that which makes their lives more predictable. (As a political scientist by training, I feel no remorse in making light of the writing abilities of those in my onetime academic field.)

Over the last few weeks, it has slowly dawned on me that I've begun seeing the word normalcy in print and hearing it uttered by, well, normal people at a level I've never encountered before. So I popped it into Google Trends and looked at the interest in this term over the last five years, and – lo and behold! – [the graph looks a lot like the rise in COVID-19 deaths](#). From Feb. 9 all the way through April 4, the slope climbs until it's almost straight up. Interest in the term has declined by nearly half since then, but it's still at rates anywhere from twice to 10 times as high as any point in the previous five years.

I get it, just as I understand the desire of millions of people who have been sheltering in place to return to normalcy. While most of us who have been fortunate enough to be able to work from home have found unexpected joys or at least certain things we preferred over the past couple of months, we're ready to socially distance ourselves in a conference room, if it means we don't have to deal with another Zoom or Microsoft Teams meeting.

There's something comforting about living predictable lives. As the Catholic writer Walker Percy examined in his essays and his novels, there's something numbing about it, too. If there's been a silver lining in the cloud of this global pandemic, it's that the numbness has gone and we've had to become more conscious of the choices we've made, are making and will make in the future.

In other words, in place of living on autopilot, we've had to become moral actors once again – which is what we've always been called to be as Christians. Every action, as Pope Benedict XVI frequently said, is a moral action, and it needs to be considered with the gravity appropriate to the situation.

As we return to normalcy, retaining that sense of ourselves as moral actors in everything we do should become our new normal.

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