

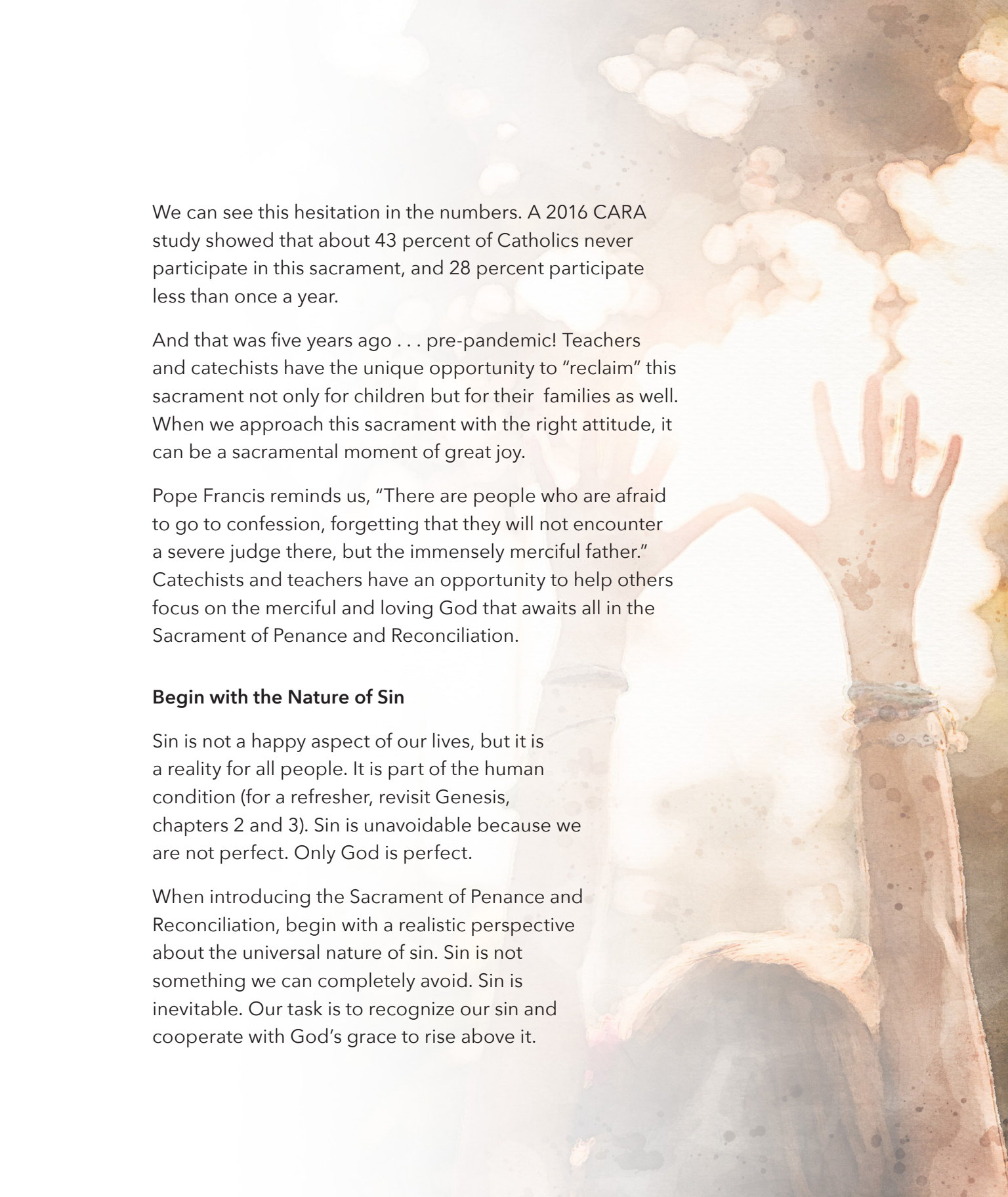
RECLAIM Reconciliation

BY LAURIE ZILIAK

During the season of Advent, the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation often becomes a sacrament of focus in faith communities. Children celebrate First Reconciliation during Advent, and parishes often offer communal reconciliation services for all. The connection is obvious—Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. What better preparation than to receive this beautiful sacrament?

And yet, many are hesitant to celebrate this sacrament for various reasons. Some feel shame and are hesitant to articulate their failings aloud. Others wonder what they have done that is so wrong that it requires an intentional moment of confession. Still others recognize the value of celebrating the sacrament but are afraid they will “mess up” the logistics.



A watercolor illustration of two hands raised in prayer, set against a warm, golden background with soft, glowing light effects. The hands are rendered in shades of brown and tan, with visible brushstrokes and a textured appearance. The background is a mix of light and dark tones, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere.

We can see this hesitation in the numbers. A 2016 CARA study showed that about 43 percent of Catholics never participate in this sacrament, and 28 percent participate less than once a year.

And that was five years ago . . . pre-pandemic! Teachers and catechists have the unique opportunity to “reclaim” this sacrament not only for children but for their families as well. When we approach this sacrament with the right attitude, it can be a sacramental moment of great joy.

Pope Francis reminds us, “There are people who are afraid to go to confession, forgetting that they will not encounter a severe judge there, but the immensely merciful father.” Catechists and teachers have an opportunity to help others focus on the merciful and loving God that awaits all in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

Begin with the Nature of Sin

Sin is not a happy aspect of our lives, but it is a reality for all people. It is part of the human condition (for a refresher, revisit Genesis, chapters 2 and 3). Sin is unavoidable because we are not perfect. Only God is perfect.

When introducing the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, begin with a realistic perspective about the universal nature of sin. Sin is not something we can completely avoid. Sin is inevitable. Our task is to recognize our sin and cooperate with God’s grace to rise above it.

Presenting the idea of sin as just a list of bad things people do that can and must be avoided is not helpful. It simply sets any child (and adult) up for failure. In addition, any list of sinful actions cannot be comprehensive in addressing every reality, every culture, or every life experience. Having children consider a list of sins limits their deeper and more important reflection on the ways sin is evident in their lives. Instead, begin with the reality of human nature—we are all sinners. All of our relationships with God, ourselves, and others will be impacted by sin at some point. Facilitate a conversation about this reality, and help the children learn to recognize it in their lives.

Emphasize Love and Mercy

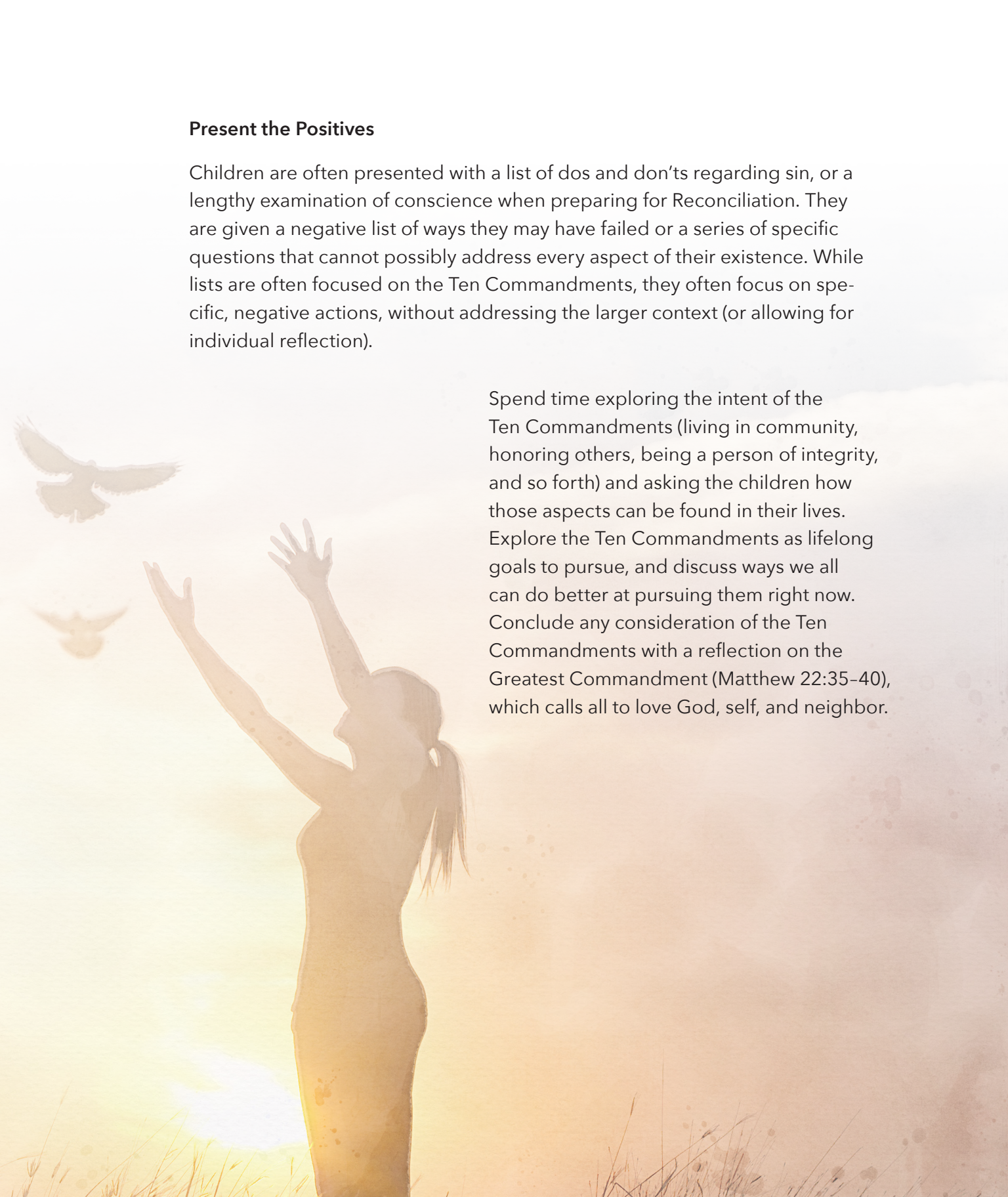
The Gospels make it clear that Jesus loved sinners. He ate with sinners (see Matthew 9:1-17), spent time with sinners (see Luke 15:2), told stories about sinners (see Luke 18:10-14), was friends with sinners (see Luke 7:34), and even stepped in when a sinner was about to be stoned for her sin (see John 8:1-11).

After recognizing the realities of sin and human nature, explore with the children the depth and breadth of God's love as presented in the Gospels. The Gospels are clear—God loves all people, regardless of the ways we have failed. While there are many possibilities, some helpful Gospel passages include:

- **Luke 7:36-50:** Jesus forgives a woman's sins as she anoints his feet.
- **Luke 15:11-32:** A loving father welcomes home his wayward son.
- **Luke 19:1-10:** Jesus visits the home of Zacchaeus, a despised tax collector.
- **Mark 2:13-17:** Jesus calls Levi (and all sinners) to discipleship.

Present the Positives

Children are often presented with a list of dos and don'ts regarding sin, or a lengthy examination of conscience when preparing for Reconciliation. They are given a negative list of ways they may have failed or a series of specific questions that cannot possibly address every aspect of their existence. While lists are often focused on the Ten Commandments, they often focus on specific, negative actions, without addressing the larger context (or allowing for individual reflection).



Spend time exploring the intent of the Ten Commandments (living in community, honoring others, being a person of integrity, and so forth) and asking the children how those aspects can be found in their lives. Explore the Ten Commandments as lifelong goals to pursue, and discuss ways we all can do better at pursuing them right now. Conclude any consideration of the Ten Commandments with a reflection on the Greatest Commandment (Matthew 22:35-40), which calls all to love God, self, and neighbor.

Expel Fear

Naming fear is an important step when exploring the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, especially with children. Many children (and adults) experience fear around this sacrament, ranging from fear of revealing the worst about themselves to fear of getting the logistics of the sacrament wrong. Address these fears directly.

- **Provide a fear factor box:** Invite the children to write anonymous notes naming their fears about the sacrament (both for those preparing for their First Reconciliation and for those who have received the sacrament previously). Set aside intentional time to address each named fear.
- **Meet the confessors:** Bring in those who will be serving as confessors during the year so the children can develop a comfort level with them. Invite each confessor to speak about their own experience of Reconciliation.
- **Prepare for the rite:** Invite the children to prepare a “cheat sheet” or index card for themselves as they prepare to celebrate the sacrament.
- **Include families:** Oftentimes, adults experience the same fears as children regarding the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. Include families in your fear-busting activities, and send home the “Dos and Don’ts for Parents: Reconciliation” handout (found on pages 24-25 of this issue), which offers some broader advice for families of children preparing to receive the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation can be a beautiful moment of grace and joy, love, and mercy if we are able to overcome the many negative fears and misperceptions often associated with it. Help the children and their families reclaim the beauty of this sacrament and celebrate it joyfully.



The statistics quoted in this article are from "Religion and Public Life," Pew Research Center, September 2, 2015. www.pewforum.org/2015/09/02/chapter-2-participation-in-catholic-rites-and-observances.

The quotation by Pope Francis in this article is from *Angelus* (Saint Peter's Square, August 2, 2015), at www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2015/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20150802.html. Copyright © LEV.

Some **Dos** and **Don'ts** for Parents: Reconciliation

Do be aware that you teach more by who you are and what you do than by what you say. Basic attitudes of faith and love will grow in your child gradually if they witness you trying to live a life of faith. Be aware of how your actions support what you want to teach your child about faith.

Do pray together as a family each day. Choose the most appropriate time according to your family circumstances. Allow each member of the family to mention something happy that has happened that day or share a particular challenge they are dealing with. Everything can be brought to God in prayer.

Do worship together as a family every Sunday. Attend Sunday Mass together and sit up front where your child can see what is happening. Family attendance at Mass will help your child understand the faith tradition that inspires the Catholic Church community.

Do take every opportunity to be forgiving about your child's poor choices. Be sure to encourage your child to be forgiving toward others as well, and to seek ways to improve relationships within the family and among friends.

Do talk with your child about your own experience of First Reconciliation.

Tell your son or daughter about your own First Reconciliation, and ask any older children in the family to do the same.



Do ask your child to share their hopes and fears about First Reconciliation. Keep an open line of communication about your child's experiences as they continue the sacrament preparation process. Encourage your child to share excitement as well as any areas of concern or fear. This will be important as you journey with your child through the preparation process.

Do reflect on how your family might live as an active part of the parish community. Try introducing some simple commitments to the Church community, such as offering an elderly person a ride to Mass on a regular basis or providing a meal to a family in crisis.

Do take time to relax and enjoy each other as a family. Setting a regular time works best. Try to make at least one family meal a week a special event. This provides an opportunity to talk, share what's happening in your lives, and reinforce your commitment to one another as a family.

Don't feel that your child has to receive First Reconciliation just because they are a certain age or in a certain grade. If you have concerns about your child's readiness, your pastor or DRE can help you assess whether or not your child is ready to begin preparation for First Reconciliation.

Don't Don't forget to remind your child often that God loves them. Recalling this love can help their desire to become their best selves.

This handout is adapted from the Reconciliation Online Resources in the *Go Seek Find: Discover God's Treasures* program.

