

## Forgive us father, we'd rather go online

- Story Highlights
- Web sites such as ivescrewedup.com invite people to "confess" online
- Confession 2.0 is a place where anonymity is a substitute for privacy
- Georgetown University study shows decline in people going to church to confess
- "Confessions" on sites range from sad to funny to criminal

By Ashley Fantz  
CNN

**(CNN)** -- If you can pay for your bills online, why not pay for your sins?

Already a repository for too much information from bloggers divulging their every intimate thought, the Web recently extended its reach into territory the church once dominated.

Tens of thousands of the guilty among us are visiting confessional booths at ivescrewedup.com, mysecret.tv and dailyconfessions.com and unburdening themselves anonymously.

As priests report a steady decline in sinners showing up to confess in person, according to a Georgetown University study, and parishes across America staff makeshift confessionals in malls with rotating priests, the guilty among us are repenting online.

On camfess.com, a woman admitted, "I don't think my boyfriend is cute." If God is checking his e-mail, He might see the "ask for forgiveness" form you completed on forgivenet.com.

Absolution is also available on YouTube, where videos of members of XXX Church, a team of pastors based in Michigan, discuss their unholy addiction to porn.

Admissions on Christian church-operated sites such as ivescrewedup.com and mysecret.tv range from shoe shopping addictions ("I can't stop. They are all so pretty") to extramarital affairs ("I'm not sure whether I should tell my wife") to criminal acts ("I have stolen about \$15,000 when working for a family member").

The majority of confessions, signed with initials and young ages, are descriptions of shame and guilt associated with sex.

Confession 2.0 is a place where anonymity is a substitute for privacy and the intimacy traditionally experienced by talking to a priest, therapist or friend is replaced by a virtual community of strangers. Among the Web site managers CNN spoke with, none has professional counselors monitoring confessions.

"This is a new genre of confession," said Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle, who has researched cyber relationships and interviewed people who post confessions online.

"They have said to me, 'This is where hope is for me.' They think they can find on these sites some kind of goodness that eludes them in real life."

But people who seek something more than their words on a Web site are often disappointed, said Turkle, who's also a psychologist. Most sites do not invite or allow responses to messages, although group hug.com allows posters to vote "hug" or "shrug" in response to confessions.

"Some responses are empathetic and kind; others aren't so nice," Turkle said. "The expectation of what you can get out of these sites far exceeds what some ultimately get, and that, in its own way, can be harmful."

"What these sites say to me is what are we are increasingly missing in our lives -- a sense of community and real, tangible connection with other people," Turkle said.

"Community" should have a broader definition, said Pastor Bobby Gruenewald of Oklahoma-based LifeChurch.tv, an evangelical consortium of 13 churches that launched mysecret.tv in 2006.

"This might be the first time some of these people are opening up about not just secrets in their life, but things they have felt embarrassed about for many years," he said.

About 30,000 people have posted "secrets" on mysecret that are linked to categories such as "lust," "cheat," "steal" and even "bestiality." When the site was featured on AOL's homepage, more than 1.3 million people clicked on it in a single day, he said.


LifeChurch members monitor messages, deleting those that are, in their view, too graphic or fabricated. Like ivescrewedup.com, which is also run by a large church, IP addresses are not tracked. If someone posts a confession of a criminal nature -- someone who says they enjoy child porn or they've committed murder -- there's not much the site managers can do about it.

A recent message on ivescrewedup.com reads: "I have killed four people. One of them was a 17 year old boy."

"We suspect that is a soldier," said Pastor Troy Gramling of South Florida's Flamingo Road Church, which launched ivescrewedup.com last year. "We don't want to track IP addresses, because that would compromise the authenticity of a site that says it's anonymous."

The churches' phone numbers are on their sites, both pastors note.

"We're hoping that if they want to reach out and give their name, or talk to someone, they will," said Gruenewald.

The Georgetown University study, which came out in 2005, found a significant decline in Catholics who go to confession. Although the [Roman Catholic Church](#) officially opposes online confessions, the Archdiocese of Washington used radio advertisements last year to encourage sinners to return to the sacrament. And in Chicago, Illinois, five parishes hosted "24 Hours of Grace" with rotating priests.  [Read more about the sacrament known as confession »](#)

But the Web does not offer a road to "true absolution," said Father Ricardo Bailey of Holy Spirit of Atlanta, Georgia.

"I'm not in a drive-thru business," he said. "Confessing means you're taking accountability for the things we've done wrong, that you understand the impact you've had on other people."

"As a priest, we ask people questions, we tell them to approach the person or persons they've wronged," Bailey said. "This [online confessing] is another way for people to avoid taking responsibility."

Holy Spirit parishioner Kim Schulman, 38, called online confession "horrible."

"It's easy to send an e-mail without emotion or remorse. ... Tone is hard to see in an e-mail," she said. "How do you know that people aren't lying, doing it for the shock value, someone trying to outdo the confession before them?"

But Gramling said online confession is not meant to replace traditional confession.

"Just because confessions don't go directly to God through a priest or a church doesn't mean they aren't sincere," he said. "And there's something healing about just going on the site and reading it, seeing all these other confessions. Some people might realize, 'Maybe I'm not alone.'"

### All About [The Roman Catholic Church](#)

---

#### Links referenced within this article

Roman Catholic Church

[http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/the\\_roman\\_catholic\\_church](http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/the_roman_catholic_church)

Read more about the sacrament known as confession »


[#cnnSTCOther1](#)

The Roman Catholic Church

[http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/The\\_Roman\\_Catholic\\_Church](http://topics.edition.cnn.com/topics/The_Roman_Catholic_Church)

#### Find this article at:

<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/wayoflife/03/13/online.confessions>

 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)



Uncheck the box to remove the list of links referenced in the article.