When the Boston archdiocese suffered a child-abuse scandal similar to the one at Gonzaga University in the 1990s, it delivered a near-fatal wound to the Catholic Church. But the crisis prompted the academic community to produce a positive response, writes Terry Philpot.

In 2002, the Church in the 21st Century Online was founded at Boston College. C21 was initially a two-year initiative to explore the roots of the clerical abuse crisis, but a centre has now been established delivering online courses to students in 30 US states and in 11 countries.

Timothy Muldoon, the C21 director, said "so many people felt paralysed by the child abuse issue" that there was an inevitability about the Jesuit university launching the initiative because it had many experts, in management, theology, philosophy and such, to help with it.

C21 focuses on sharing faith with the next generation; the roles of the laity, priests and bishops; sexuality; and the Catholic intellectual tradition. It runs public lectures and conferences, and it publishes relevant works including a book series.

Mr Muldoon, who joined C21 in July 2005 from Mount Aloysius College in Pennsylvania, said: "What launched C21 was the crisis, not the scandal. The scandal revealed a host of other questions that had to be asked.

"We don't see ourselves as a centre to reflect on abuse but rather to reflect on the neuralgic issues facing the Church - a place that can marshal the resources to address those questions," Mr Muldoon added.