The Power, Politics, and Geography of a Sacred Place:
Focusing on Myongdong Cathedral, Seoul, Korea

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Abstract: This study focuses on the placeness of Seoul's Myongdong Cathedral and its changing social significance. Myongdong Cathedral, built in 1898, was the first Catholic Church in Korea. The Cathedral became a symbol of popular democratic movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s as it served as a safe haven for anti-government demonstrations and dissident activities. The Cathedral was widely recognized throughout the 1980s as a sanctuary to labor union members and students on the run from the dictatorial regime. In the 1990s, however, the Catholic Church was increasingly repelled by interest groups, which aimed to use the cathedral as a channel to have their voice heard. Attitudes towards protesters shown by priests, worshippers, and small business owners in the neighborhood were ones of welcome in the mid 1970s. After the initial euphoria died down in the 1990s, the sense of apathy and connivance set in. Such attitude of indifference was then replaced by that of anger and antagonism. Such negative attitudes towards demonstrators were reflected in the change of the Church's demonstration policy in 2000, which would no longer approve demonstrations without prior permission. The move came following the rally organized by Korea Telecom Union members in December 2000 who engaged in vandalizing the Cathedral's property. Apart from this, just by examining the type of rallies that took place at Myongdong Cathedral, one can learn about important issues that emerged in Korean society.

Key Words: place and culture, poetics and politics of place, sacred place,

I. Introduction

Myongdong Cathedral, the first Catholic cathedral in Korea, was built in 1898. Located in the Myongdong area, one of the major shopping and commercial districts in downtown Seoul, the Cathedral has been recognized as a spiritual symbol of the Korean