

The Urban Missionary

What has Boston's Episcopal Church done for the inner city lately?
Not much. Bishop John Coburn means to change all that.

Profile by John Sedgwick

"I have asked you all here because you are people I know and trust and respect," the bishop begins in the loud, firm voice that has stirred congregations for four decades. "You know the bishop, too. And you know his failings. I don't want to waste time getting acquainted."

John Bowen Coburn, head of the Massachusetts diocese of the Episcopal Church, is addressing various religious leaders in the broad banquet hall of the Diocesan House, an elegant brownstone on the fashionable side of Beacon Hill. Aside from his rank, a plaid jacket distinguishes him from the other Episcopal luminaries—the rector of Trinity Church, the minister of St. Peter's in Weston—whose tight white collars shine above dark summer-weight suits. Among their grays and blues, a young clergywoman in a turquoise blouse stands out; she owes her presence here, among the men to a canon that Bishop Coburn recently helped push through one of the church's national legislative bodies, the House of Deputies, over which he presided for nine years before coming to Massachusetts in 1976.

Various black Episcopal ministers are here this July evening, too, along with representatives of other churches—Roman Catholic, United Church of Christ. A former commissioner of human services, a black candidate for the Medford City Council, a female factory worker from New Bedford, and other laymen and -women complete the assembly. All of them are indeed old friends, as the kindly-looking, gray-haired bishop has made clear.

But this is no church social. This is the first meeting of the Committee on Urban Mission. Together, the bishop and this group he has assembled will try to resurrect the forsaken inner cities of one of the largest Episcopal dioceses in the nation.

It is a radical undertaking, for Coburn personally and for the church as a whole. He has watched with frustration as the Episcopal Church, both nationally and locally, has gone the way of other churches, philanthropic institutions, and political activists—drawing back from sixties commitment into seventies self-absorption. Coburn has spent a lifetime tending to the needs of others, as an Episcopal priest, as the author of nine books of spiritual guidance, as a teacher, as a leader of the church, and now as bishop. He has hardly ever had a moment to himself or, something he regrets more, a moment to be with his family. He has been practically a stranger to his four children.

Yet now, despite the increasing demands on his time, Coburn wants to do more. That's why he has enlisted these men and women for the Urban Mission Committee.

Coburn has big plans for his committee and for his diocese. He wants to rebuild the fallen neighborhoods of Fall River, New Bedford, Lawrence, Lowell, as well as Boston (Coburn's district, even though it is called the diocese of Massachusetts, stops east of Worcester). Each city has its own economic, ethnic, and geographical identity. Yet they all have a set of different but damnably interconnected problems: racism, sexism, ageism, the breakdown of the family, gentrification,

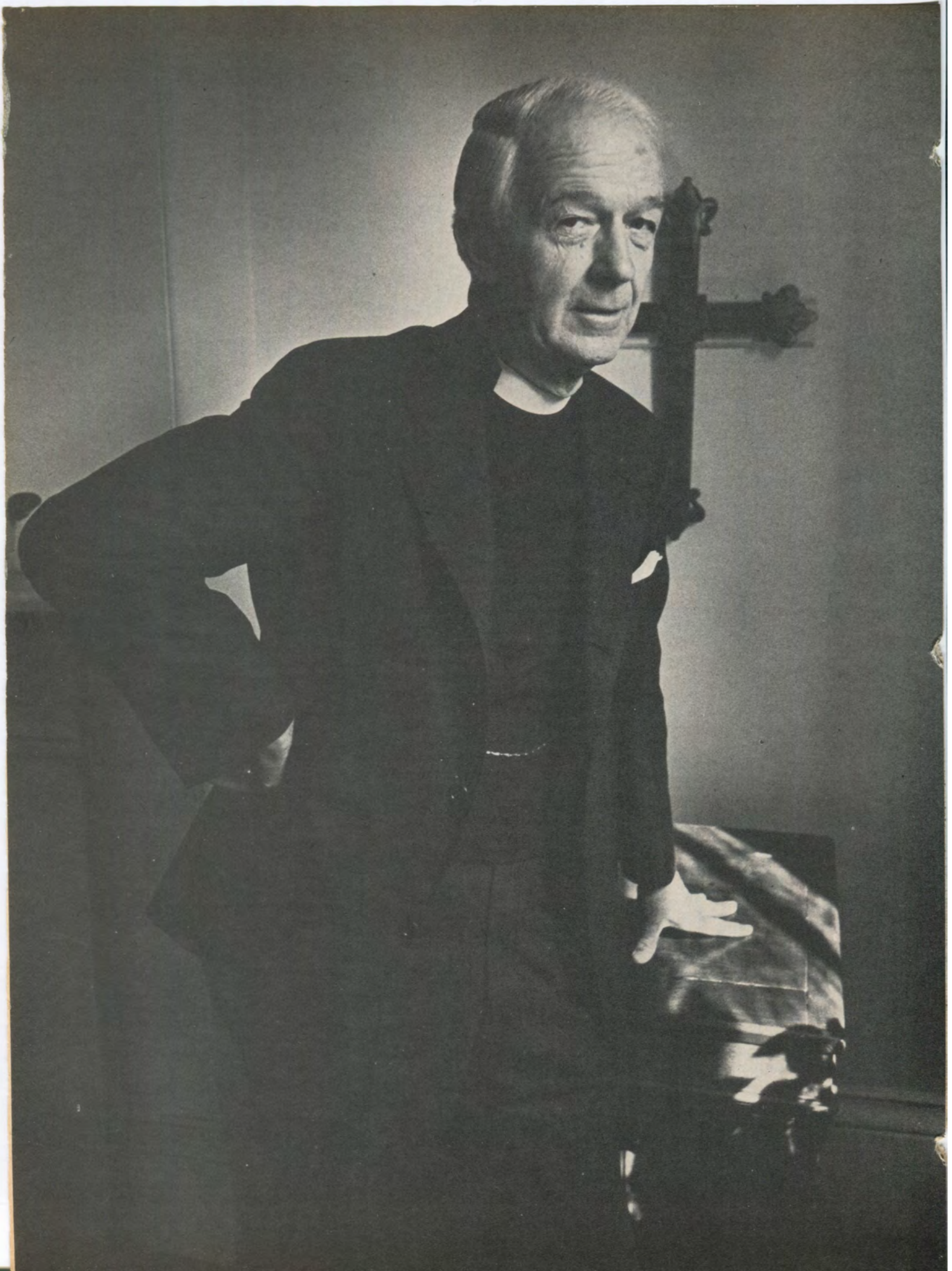
redlining, an eroding tax base, political indifference, widespread unemployment, inadequate housing, lousy schools.

To make his task even tougher, Coburn has an image problem. The Episcopal Church, an offspring of the Church of England, is identified more with suburban, WASP-only country clubs than with the urban poor. It has a reputation for fancy ceremonies and snooty ways. Everyone figured it moved out to the suburbs in the forties along with the Episcopalians and hasn't looked back since. What's more, this is a time when the ministry of good works has fallen into disfavor. Nowadays, when people look to religion at all, they look for personal salvation only. Missionary zeal is out. They want to put God to work for them.

In 1968, John Coburn left the prestigious job of dean of the Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge to teach children in a tumbledown storefront in central Harlem. He is not about to turn his back on that calling now, not for any reason. In his mind, the Episcopal diocese of Massachusetts cannot ignore the problems of the city. It's as simple as that: Cannot. "We are going through a period of personal renewal in Christian faith, but one which is centered on the personal experience of God's presence," Coburn had said in an earlier interview in his Diocesan House study. His voice rose and fell gently, the voice of a pastor. "I'm all for it."

"But," Coburn went on, and now the prophet spoke up, "the Christian faith is not just a matter of personal redemption.

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There is the matter of social redemption, too. Participation in Christian life *requires* an awareness of the society of which we're a part. Housing, employment, education—these are all part and parcel of the Christian gospel." The bishop was worked up, but he remained completely unruffled, his hands folded in his lap. He was just reciting facts. "Among other things, this means speaking out when injustices like cutting back on welfare for the sake of middle-class real estate occur. The dimension in the gospel of justice for society *must be affirmed*."

The Episcopal Church is the right instrument for social change, Coburn believes. It's true, he said, that the church has lately retreated somewhat from its social commitment. But from the Underground Railroad of the pre-Civil War era to the civil-rights and peace movements of the sixties, its record of social activism was practically unequalled.

What's more—although the bishop was reluctant to say so—the Episcopal is the church of the Establishment. There may be only 120,000 Episcopalians in the Massachusetts diocese—compared with more than two million Boston-area Catholics—but they carry a weight far disproportionate to their number. The Episcopal Church, once it supplanted the Unitarian Church in the last century, has been the religion of Boston's aristocracy, the power elite. Everything that is English in New England is Episcopalian. And that's a lot: generations of Bundys, Peabodys, Lawrences, and other Brahmins; the fabled New England prep schools of Groton, St. Paul's, and St. Mark's; the directors, trustees, and presidents of countless banks, hospitals, museums, philanthropic institutions, and law firms (according to a recent survey, one-third of all chief executives in law firms across the country are Episcopalians). Wherever the powerful and the prestigious gather, there are the Episcopalians. And they can make things happen.

But since the Episcopalian civil-rights campaign of the sixties the church has made little happen in the way of social hell-raising. Bishop Coburn's job is to start things up again. If one can judge from his work as a teacher in Harlem, as president of the House of Deputies, and as an author, Coburn is the right man for the task. He has a reputation for being tough but fair, sensitive but clear-headed. "Everyplace Coburn has been, his personality—just the way he handles himself—commanded immediate respect," says a long-time friend of his, the Reverend Thom Blair, rector of Trinity Church. "He is a terrific spokesman for the diocese. He's got an excellent mind. He

doesn't go off half-cocked. He's just a man people naturally pay attention to."

But will the people Coburn must reach to accomplish his mission pay attention to the Episcopal Church? Over the years, bishops have been loath to get involved in state and local politics. "The church has more political power than it realizes," says Carl Scovel, rector of the Unitarian (formerly Episcopalian) King's Chapel, referring to his own church as well as the Episcopal, "but we fritter it away in uncoordinated bitching from church leaders." Coburn intends to coordinate the bitching, reviewing legislation and lobbying for policy that reflects Christian principles. "We've got to speak out," he says.

The truth is, the Episcopal Church has a bigger jump on the missionary job than its reputation would suggest. Despite suburbanization, a third of the Episcopal churches in eastern Massachusetts are still located in the inner city. The Episcopal Church, contrary to popular impression, has the third-largest black membership of all Protestant churches. A key element of Coburn's Urban Mission is to organize these city churches so that they can better serve the needs of the urban poor instead of just their own congregations. "Exxon wouldn't have eighteen gas stations around town and let them all act like independents," says Thom Blair. "The Episcopal Church shouldn't act that way either."

But the church still maintains its contacts with the white Establishment. Meaning that the diocese can effectively put the touch on corporate Boston and encourage it to act more responsibly. "We have to let the First National Bank know that its activities in the city have profound impact on a lot of God's people," says Blair.

The Massachusetts diocese's movement into the city is part of a well-planned, broad-based national Episcopal campaign. The idea was first approved by the national church leadership back in 1976 at a meeting of the Urban Bishops Coalition. That coalition, in turn, organized a series of hearings in seven cities across the country to determine just how the Episcopal Church could solve urban problems. Coburn, the recently consecrated bishop of Massachusetts, chaired the first of these hearings, in Chicago in 1977, and then returned to Massachusetts to conduct local hearings in Boston, Lowell, and Fall River. Then-governor Michael Dukakis, state representative Mel King, superintendent of schools Robert Wood, and several hundred others testified.

But hearings take you only so far. Or, as Coburn says, "The rhetoric is easy; the hard part is delivering." The committee convened on Beacon Hill this night in July has the hard part. It is scheduled to deliver its first programs this fall, making



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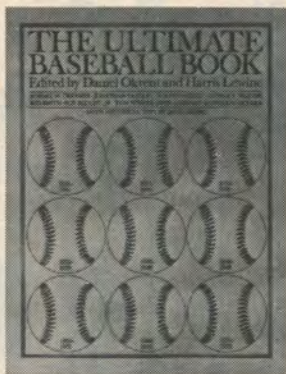
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the diocese of Massachusetts the first in the country to act in the inner city. Coburn tells the group, "We're the path breakers."

With the responsibilities before him, and without precedents to guide him, Coburn might be forgiven for feeling some uncertainty. If he feels any, he doesn't show it. He leans back in his chair, spreading his arms onto the backs of the chairs beside him, a gesture both relaxed and all-embracing. He lets out a big breath of air, and the Urban Mission is under way.

Bishop John Coburn looks like a caricature of the jolly vicar: high cheekbones that are regularly hoisting the smile lines of his face, warm, toothy grin, thinning white hair, receding chin, and tiny eyes that peek out from below ruffled white eyebrows. The image is revealing. Coburn is a delightfully happy man who jokes often and erupts easily into a hearty chuckle that seems to come from his core.

Many of the prayers published in his Diary of Prayers are about exultation, about jumping into snowdrifts, blowing kisses at nuns, making love. Despite his sixty-five years, he retains a large dose of childlike vigor, perhaps springing from the half-hour yoga exercises he completes each morning. He loves to run naked at sunup on the beach near his Wellfleet summer house—"streaking with the seagulls" he calls it—and to wind up plunging into the water for a brisk skinny-dip (he says it brings him in closer touch with God). He wears a Panama hat, prays for the Red Sox, and smokes fine cigars.

There is more, of course, to this bishop than energy and an endearing smile. He's a scrapper. Has been all his life. Born in 1914 to a private-school headmaster in Danbury, Connecticut, John Coburn majored in political science at Princeton University and then taught school in Istanbul for three years while deciding on a career. On one of his first days conducting homeroom for about eighty Turkish teen-age boys, the youngsters decided to test the American's mettle. Keeping their heads down and their eyes on their books, they started to hum. The noise began at one end of the room, worked its way down to the other, went round in circles, grew loud, grew soft, grew loud again, louder than ever. Speaking no Turkish, Coburn didn't know what to do. "Silence!" he yelled, slamming his fist down on his desk. For a moment the humming stopped. Then it started again, going round and round, rising and falling as before. Now what? Coburn didn't hesitate. He jumped out of his chair, grabbed the meanest-looking boy he could find, smashed him over the head, grabbed him by the seat of his pants, and threw him out of the room. The humming stopped.

That was that. Coburn had no further trouble.

Coburn has had the same no-nonsense



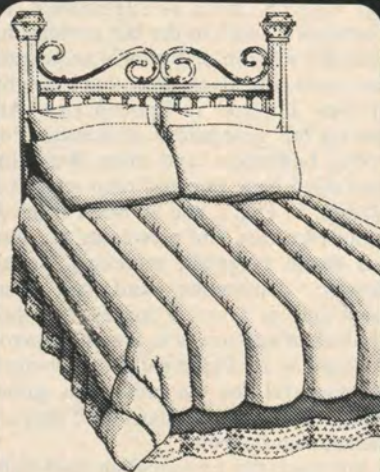
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approach to his career. In a field with exceedingly few promotion opportunities, he has shown remarkable upward mobility. He took his vows in 1943 in order to minister to servicemen overseas in the war. After the armistice, he signed on as chaplain of Amherst College. Seven years later he moved on to become dean of huge Trinity Cathedral in Newark, New Jersey. Five years later, in 1957, he was selected dean of the illustrious Episcopal Theological School in Cambridge (now called the Episcopal Divinity School). In 1967, while still dean, he was elected to the presidency of the 900-member House of Deputies, the highest honor the Episcopal Church can bestow on a clergyman without making him bishop. After teaching in Harlem on his sabbatical year in 1969, he left E.T.S. altogether to become rector of St. James Church in upper Manhattan. In 1975, the diocese of Massachusetts elected him bishop, a post he assumed the following year.

Yet, things have not always gone easily in John Coburn's life, and a hard-nosed attitude has served him well here, too. In 1956, while he was dean of the Newark cathedral, his youngest daughter, just two years old, died suddenly when, as the doctor put it, "her lungs filled up." The Coburns buried the little girl's ashes at sunset on a hillside behind the local church at Wellfleet. The first stars were just coming out as the family rolled a stone over the grave. All John Coburn could think was how silent the stars were and that the ache would never go away.

Eighteen months later, an editor of the Seabury Press, the official publisher for the Episcopal Church, which had brought out one other Coburn book, asked him if he could write about the experience. The minister said he couldn't possibly. The pain was still too great. But give him time. Finally, in the summer of 1963, Coburn went into his study in Wellfleet and started to write. The book that emerged was *Anne and the Sand Dobbies*.

Set on the Cape, the book tells of how Danny, the eleven-year-old narrator, faces the deaths of both his two-year-old sister, Anne, and his dog, Bonnie, in the same summer. Some magical Cape Cod creatures called Sand Dobbies help him get through it all by introducing Danny to the world beyond reality, beyond death. It's a touching book. Thirteen years after it was published, Coburn still gets hundreds of letters from readers, young and old, thanking him for making death seem a little less frightening. The book helped Coburn too. "The imaginative, mystical quality of life is terribly important," he says. "We can be lifted by the spirit beyond the facts of experience. That's what I like. That's the spirit of God moving among His people."

Equally impressive is the spirit of John Coburn moving among his people. As president of the House of Deputies between 1967 and 1976, he saw that vast as-

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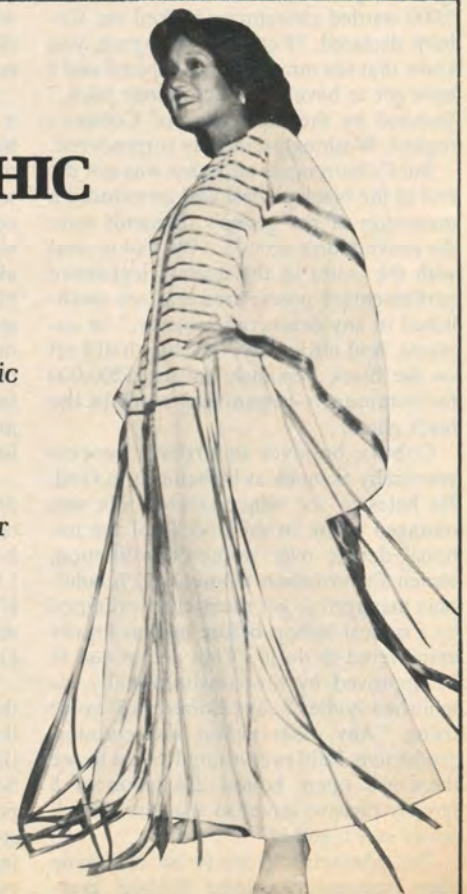
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sembly through some pretty nasty weather. It faced up to such touchy issues as women's ordination, the most radical modernization of the language in the prayer book in four centuries, and a militant black uprising. By all accounts, Coburn handled his office with authority and grace. Says one House member: "Coburn could stand up at even the stormiest meeting and radiate peace."

One such incident occurred at a special convention in 1969 held in the Notre Dame University hockey rink and attended by some 5,000 people: both branches of the church legislature (House of Deputies and House of Bishops) as well as spectators and press. As House president, Coburn chaired the assembly. All went smoothly until the middle of the meeting, when a group of militant black priests marched up to the podium, seized the microphone, and started to harangue the audience with, among other things, a demand for \$250 million in "reparations" for the black community. Coburn was in a tight spot. He believed the legitimacy of the black demands, yet he also believed very strongly in the parliamentary process. Says diocesan staff person Mary Whitten, "The bishop is a process person from the top of his head to the soles of his feet." By taking over the assembly, the blacks were violating every parliamentary rule in Roberts's book. Coburn let the leader of the black group, priest Paul Washington, have ten minutes to speak his piece. Then he moved in. While 5,000 startled churchmen looked on, Coburn declared, "Father Washington, you know that ten minutes have expired and I have *got* to have that microphone back." Stunned by the diplomacy of Coburn's request, Washington meekly surrendered.

But Coburn made sure that was not the end of the black protest and introduced a discussion of the group's demands onto the convention's agenda. "We had to deal with the issues in the normal legislative parliamentary procedures that are established in any democratic society," he explains. And ultimately, the church did act on the black demands, raising \$200,000 for community-organizing work in the black ghetto.

Coburn believes in orderly process practically as much as he believes in God. He hates to see either crossed. He was outraged when, in the middle of the national debate over women's ordination, eleven Episcopalian women in Philadelphia managed to get themselves ordained by a radical bishop before he was legally empowered to do it. "That action *had* to be approved by the constitutionally established bodies," says Coburn, his voice rising. "Any other action was counterproductive. I did everything I could to see there was open, honest discussion of a terribly divisive issue, so that the church would stay together."

The obstacles to unity on the issue were immense: apparent Biblical sanc-

tions against female priests; the stout refusal of the Catholic Church, the Episcopal's historical parent, to accept women into the priesthood. But Coburn, feeling that it was high time that the church was opened up to women, put off his consecration as bishop of Massachusetts for a year so he could stay on in the House of Deputies (where no bishop is allowed). Coburn felt that once the issue of women's ordination was given a fair hearing, the assembly would accept it. He was right—and the church stayed together.

Now that the new canon has been passed, Coburn has joyfully ordained dozens of women, including his daughter-in-law, Ann Coburn, who took her vows with her husband, Michael, in a much-publicized joint ceremony that was the first of its kind in the nation. Several Episcopal clergymen denounced Ms. Coburn's half of the affair, and one priest even spoke out during the ceremony itself. He rose in the church to say that as much as he liked Ms. Coburn personally, he simply could not bear the idea of a woman priest. Bishop Coburn thanked the man for "the dignity of his request," and went on with the service.

Certainly, this process person has a way of getting the process to work for him. As his friend Brookline minister George Blackman says, "Coburn is marvelous in his ability to use all relationships—teasing, cajoling, provoking—to swing everyone around to his point of view, all without seeming to take a stand himself. I can't think of anyone quite like him except Franklin Roosevelt."

As bishop of the diocese, Coburn is in a somewhat stronger position to protect his interests than in the House of Deputies, where, by canon and convention, he was merely "first among equals." As bishop, Coburn goes to some lengths to review all candidates for ordination, and also makes a point of putting friends in high places. The Reverend Ed Rodman, a member of the Urban Mission Committee calls this "the judicious use of church appointments. The bishop's a smart guy," he goes on. "He picks his men carefully—and makes them toe the line. He'd be a super ward leader."

The bishop makes no apologies for playing power politics in the church. It's only human, he says. "Politics is the art of human interaction. I like politics because I like human existence and I like people. If you're confident, you can go into the mishmash and the struggle with a certain kind of spirit. I'm happy to. It's fun."

Coburn's political skills appear to be the sort that pull people together rather than push them apart. As dean, Coburn liberalized the Episcopal Theological School by increasing the number of minority students and women and accepting students who weren't committed to taking vows. Yet he managed to keep the old guard happy and pulled off the school's

most successful capital fund drive in decades. As one student put it admiringly, "Coburn blunted the thrust of the right wing at the beginning, but he got \$10 million out of those clowns at the end." Similarly, when he completed work at the Harlem street academy and moved across town to one of the richest churches in Manhattan, St. James, he didn't leave his Harlem experience behind: He launched St. James on the biggest community-outreach program in Harlem that the church had ever seen.

With a record like this, plus his work in the church legislature behind him, Coburn has come out of "the mishmash and the struggle" in pretty good shape. Many people in the church would like to see him elected presiding bishop, the highest office in the Episcopal Church in America. Coburn himself prefers not to talk about it—at least for the record—but he is known to have his differences with the incumbent, John Allin. He was shocked when Allin led off a 1977 meeting of the House of Bishops, a year after women's ordination was passed, by saying that he personally could not accept the idea of female clergy. Coburn expects church leaders to go along with its legislature. The church has to stay together.

Coburn has an undeniable following throughout the church. He was twice elected to head other dioceses without his knowledge or consent, before allowing himself to be a candidate for bishop of Massachusetts in 1975. He won handily, even though he was preaching in New York at the time. His consecration ceremony had to be held in the hockey rink at Boston College instead of the traditional location, Trinity Church, in order to accommodate all the people who wanted to attend. Some 5,000 showed up, including Humberto Cardinal Medeiros (who had to give his permission to hold an Episcopal ceremony at B.C.) and Governor Dukakis. In keeping with the new bishop's philosophy, several clergymen helped present Coburn with the ring, pectoral cross, and shepherd's staff of his office.

Two years later, the Lambeth Conference, an international colloquy of 440 Anglican and Episcopal bishops occurring every ten years or so, was held at England's Canterbury Cathedral under the auspices of Kent University. At the end of it, by convention, three honorary Kent University degrees were to be awarded to three conference members. "How can we select from this great see of bishops?" asked the archbishop of Canterbury rhetorically, "this right and reverend assembly, this plethora of purple?" It was easy. One degree went to Bishop Tutu for fighting apartheid in South Africa, another to a noted Irish scholar and teacher, Bishop Simms. The third went to Bishop John Coburn.

Of the eleven generations of Coburn men in America, the first three were all farm-

ers. The remaining eight have been either teachers or preachers. Bishop John Coburn has been both—and torn between the two all his life. (Of Coburn's two sons, one is a minister, and the other teaches comparative religion; so the tradition continues.) Coburn grew up at Wooster School, a private academy which his father, the Reverend Aaron Coburn, ran in Danbury, Connecticut. When John graduated from Princeton in 1936, father wanted son to come back to teach at Wooster, with the prospect of becoming headmaster eventually. However, John wanted no part of prep-school parochialism—particularly if it involved his father. "I've got to strike out on my own," he wrote the elder Coburn. He did just that, all the way to Istanbul, where he ended up at Robert College teaching English and biology to a roomful of humming Turks.

Coburn quickly found out, however, that before he could hammer any book-learning into these kids, he'd have to teach them something about moral values. He made the discovery when he caught the whole class cheating on the first biology exam. That got the young teacher thinking—about morality, about human nature, and finally about God. "I found that I was more interested in people who belonged to a community that cared about values," he recalls. "That seemed to me to be in the long run of greater significance than anything else. I guess that reflects an interest in human nature. I started pondering the questions of how we are created the way we are and how we develop our values. Where do these values come from? That brought me to grapple with the question of divine being and divine revelation."

After three years in Istanbul, Coburn joined the ministry (and joined in holy matrimony with Ruth Barnum, who also worked at Robert College), enrolling in the Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Coburn has been shuttling back and forth between shrine and classroom ever since: Navy chaplain, Amherst chaplain; Trinity Cathedral dean, Episcopal Theological School director. One course has taken him out into the world; the other, fixed on the more ethereal considerations of God and morality, has led him away from it. He has needed both, both his Sand Dobbies and his Turks.

In 1967, however, something happened that made Coburn realize that teaching theology was too abstract, that he'd have to move closer to the everyday world of men and women. Jonathan Daniels, a twenty-one-year-old divinity student and a good friend of Coburn's at E.T.S., was murdered while leading a black voter-registration drive in Selma, Alabama. Daniels and a young black girl had tried to enter a drug store to buy a Coke. The owner waved a shotgun in their faces and told them to get off his property. When they were slow to move, he fired, killing

Daniels instantly and wounding the girl.

When Coburn heard the news, he went to Selma himself to continue Daniels's work. Later he decided to take a sabbatical from E.T.S. and teach at the Harlem street academy. "A lot of people were shocked and baffled when I went to Harlem," says Coburn. "But I went to tell Jonathan Daniels I loved him."

Afterwards, Coburn knew he could never return to E.T.S. "The experience was too searing, or too broadening, or simply too enjoyable." That's why he went to upper Manhattan's St. James, which allowed him to continue his Harlem work. The street academy, which had been funded by Time, Inc., is boarded up now—"a sad commentary on our society," says Coburn. But it is clear from the Urban Mission that Coburn brings the spirit of the place to his new job as bishop of Massachusetts.

The smile lines on the bishop's face, as he presides over the Urban Mission meeting, are creased deeper than usual from fatigue. "The bishop of this diocese is really put on the rack," says Brookline's minister George Blackman. During the week Coburn works on policy and priorities for the diocese at his Diocesan House office; on weekends he drives out to the parishes to tend to the spiritual needs of his diocesan flock, conferring with vestry and clergy, preaching, confirming, ministering to his people. As head of the diocese he is frequently called in to settle parish disputes, as when, for instance, a congregation wants to oust its rector, or when the rector has run off with the organist, as sometimes happens. He tries to take Mondays off but rarely succeeds.

The headaches have taken their toll on the bishop. Already on this day of the first Urban Mission meeting, he has met with clergy in the morning, had a two-hour lunch meeting at noon to discuss ways to open up the cathedral, traditionally the bishop's seat in the diocese, as a center for church work in the city, and conferred with more visitors in the afternoon before settling down to this five-hour meeting, which will include dinner.

The meeting is slow going. The group is supposed to have familiarized itself with the records of the Urban Bishops Coalition's hearings, but many have not. That seems to discourage the diocesan staff. Questions abound, but there are few immediate answers. Should the diocese help the poor directly, or work through the parishes? Should the church go it alone, or act ecumenically? Should it take on the political structure or act apart from it? Can seminaries instill an urban consciousness in priests? Can the church fight racism? One question did not come up: Can the church do anything at all with the Urban Mission on a yearly budget of \$108,000?

Bishop Coburn listens intently, breaking his concentration from time to time

only to remove his glasses and rub his eyes. Finally, he comments: "It looks like we've got hold of an octopus here, doesn't it?"

And then it's time for dinner. Someone asks if the meeting should continue over the meal. "Certainly we can talk while we eat," Coburn replies, "just so long as we know what we have to digest." Everyone gets the point.

After dinner, things seem to settle down a bit, as the group starts to pin down this octopus leg by leg. It becomes apparent that the members are molded in their bishop's image. All are tough, pragmatic people. And all use the language of the pulpit, making sermons instead of speeches. They speak of "affirmation," "pilgrimage," and "the Holy Spirit."

And the spirit moves the group. The future of the cathedral should be resolved first, everyone agrees. Since it is situated in the inner city, on Tremont Street facing Boston Common (as someone commented at the cathedral meeting earlier, "Drunks urinate on the walls; you can't get much more urban than that"), it would provide a concrete example of the diocese's intentions in the city. It also became clear that, as one move to link up with other institutions working in the city, the Episcopal Church could join forces with the Roman Catholic Paulist Center to address the problem of transient housing. The seminaries could easily require that candidates for the ministry to spend some time in the inner city before being ordained. Definitely, the group should work ecumenically, but from an Episcopalian base; after all, that's how the committee itself is organized. And the committee makes some progress on the question of a center for urban church activities. It shall be a program existing apart from any fixed location, a "bazaar" or "switchboard" linking up community needs and church resources.

The group seems to be pulling together, and Coburn is proud of it, despite the lack of any dramatic progress tonight. He knows that these things take time. That is what being a process person is all about.

The bishop explained earlier: "Urban Mission means people banding together in a spirit of common concern, regardless of class or race. I know that's asking a lot. Tension is always going to exist. We're not going to establish the Kingdom of God on earth tomorrow. I only hope to make it possible for people to live together with a common sense of brotherhood."

That was the prophet speaking. It remains for the pastor actually to work things out in the political mishmash. For Coburn, however, this is the best part. He takes his inspiration from the Incarnation. "If you believe that Christ took our flesh upon him, then you shouldn't be surprised to see a Christian act politically," he declares. "To have the spirit operating divorced from the body politic, why, that's just bad theology!" □