Full, Active and Conscious Liturgical Preaching
A Look at Multiple Intelligences Theory

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The authors summarize the work of Harvard education professor Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences. Explaining Gardner’s idea of various ways whereby humans absorb and process information, the writers go on to suggest four valuable lessons for the homilist.

Pastors of souls must realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the laws governing valid and lawful celebration. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by it (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 11: italics added).

In the wake of Vatican II, the desire for the assembly to be “fully aware,” “actively engaged,” and “enriched by” the Sunday eucharistic liturgy manifested itself in different ways. Some efforts were classic adaptations and have weathered the test of time. Other efforts, however, did not last. They were well intentioned but they missed the mark of genuine adaptation of the Roman liturgical tradition. Some of these failed efforts to bolster participation seem to have been foisted on the liturgical assembly without consideration of its “readiness for ritual.”

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For instance, many Catholic preachers in the U.S. translated the desire for “full, active and conscious participation” into what was called “the dialogue homily.” These homilies took the shape of questions and answers, conversations about the Lectionary texts, or invitations for personal reflections on the readings by anyone who wished to speak. For congregations who were silent for centuries, this often proved daunting.

Nearly forty years have passed since the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. With respect to the Sunday homily, much has changed. Few preachers believe that “fully aware,” “actively engaged,” and “enriched by” is achieved through a homily that elicits an assembly’s shouting, answering questions, or offering personal commentaries on Scripture. The “dialogue homily” is generally no longer a part of the liturgical preacher’s repertoire in the U.S. Nonetheless, the concern for the engagement of the community in liturgical preaching remains imperative. Thus the question remains: how does the liturgical preacher authentically understand the nature of this participation and create such engagement?

In exploring this question here, it is assumed that the homily can activate the assembly’s intelligence, memory, and imagination as a speech event, spoken only by the homilist. We believe that the assembly can participate fully and actively in the liturgy through active listening and remembrance, and through the release of the imagination in a creative speech event. The homiletic action is capable of prompting the assembly to give praise and thanks for God’s Good News of salvation, both at the eucharistic table and in the community’s acts of mercy.

In order to understand more fully how this can be achieved, we will examine the educational theory of Howard Gardner, particularly his idea of “multiple intelligences” [or MI]. We believe that the explanatory categories offered by MI theory are a helpful way of thinking about vital liturgical preaching and the engagement of the liturgical assembly. After considering Gardner’s theory of MI, we will explore some key implications of this theory for homiletics.

Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Trained as a developmental psychologist, Gardner is currently a member of Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Gardner conceived and began to construct his MI theory. His approach challenged the traditional understanding of intelligence as unitary and measurable through standardized paper and pencil tests (e.g., the Stanford-Binet IQ test). Instead, Gardner argued for what he calls a “theory of multiple intelligences.” Quite simply, he believes that intelligence is multiple, not unitary. Moreover, because intelligence is multiple, it must be assessed and engaged in culturally variable and multiple ways.
In his foundational work, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Gardner defines intelligence as “the ability to solve problems or fashion products which are valued in one or more cultural settings” (1993, x). In his latest book on this subject, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*, he offers a more refined definition. Gardner now conceptualizes intelligence as a “biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (1999, 39). While this second definition shows advancement, the basic idea remains the same: human beings are born with multiple intelligences. The combination of nature (biopsychological potential) and nurture (one's cultural setting) gives rise to the development and differences of these intelligences between people.

According to Gardner, there are at least eight intelligences belonging to the human family. They are, and in no special order, (1) linguistic, (2) logical-mathematical, (3) musical, (4) spatial, (5) interpersonal, (6) intrapersonal, (7) bodily-kinesthetic, and (8) naturalist (1999, 41–43). A few words will be presented about each of these.

**Linguistic intelligence** involves sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages, and the capacity to use language to accomplish certain goals. Lawyers, preachers, writers, poets, are among those with high linguistic intelligences.

**Logical-mathematical intelligence** involves the capacity to analyze problems logically, carry out mathematical operations, and investigate issues scientifically. Mathematicians, logicians, and scientists embody this intelligence.

**Musical intelligence** is that intelligence which entails skill in the performance, composition, and appreciation of musical patterns. Musicians of all kinds model this intelligence.

**Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence** entails the potential of using one’s whole body or parts of the body to solve problems or fashion products. Dancers, athletes, sculptors, surgeons, and carpenters are good examples of people with a high degree of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence.

**Spatial intelligence** is that intelligence which features the potential to recognize and manipulate the patterns of wide space as well as the patterns of more confined areas. Architects, pilots, interior designers, and graphic artists manifest high spatial intelligence.

**Interpersonal intelligence** is a person’s capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people and, consequently, to collaborate effectively...
with others. Salespeople, teachers, religious and political leaders possess much interpersonal intelligence.

Intrapersonal intelligence involves that capacity to understand oneself and to use such information effectively in living out one's own life. Psychologists, counselors, and monks model this particular intelligence.

Naturalist intelligence entails expertise in the recognition and classification of the numerous species—the flora and fauna—of one's own environment.

Gardner freely admits that his list of eight intelligences is by no means final. In Intelligence Reframed (1999) he considers adding three new intelligences to his original list of eight: “spiritual,” “existential,” and “moral.” In order for a proposed intelligence to become a bona fide intelligence, Gardner believes it must meet several criteria: (1) the potential of isolation by brain damage, (2) an evolutionary history and evolutionary plausibility, (3) an identifiable core operation or set of operations, (4) susceptibility to encoding in a symbol system, (5) a distinct developmental history, along with a definable set of expert end-state performances, (6) the existence of idiot savants, prodigies, and other exceptional people, (7) support from experimental psychological tasks, and (8) support from psychometric findings (1999, 35–41).

One important point is Gardner's belief that each human person possesses all eight of these intelligences to some degree. What makes individuals unique, however, is the difference in the "amount" of biopsychological potential with which each person is born (genetic predisposition vis-a-vis one's intelligences) and the degree to which persons develop that biopsychological potential (environmental factors). For instance, two persons at birth may have the same bodily-kinesthetic biopsychological potential. Nevertheless, because of different cultural contexts where this form of intelligence may or may not be valued, one individual may develop it, while the other person may not. It is never the case, however, that a human person does not possess and develop some bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, since each cultural context has a degree of appreciation for the body.

Interestingly, the educational community and not the intelligence testing community picked up on MI theory. It did so precisely because MI resonated well with what the educational community already knew: students are not the same and all students do not have the same kinds of minds. Thus, teachers are most
effective if these differences among their students are consciously appropriated into their teaching methods and testing instruments, rather than deny or dismiss the multiplicity of intelligence potential.

In summary, Gardner provides an innovative theory for understanding and engaging human intelligences. No doubt, there are many educational implications that follow from this new understanding of intelligence. In view of our concern about active participation in the liturgy, two of these educational insights are particularly important.

First, educators must realize that every community of learners possesses these multiple intelligences. Furthermore, educators are to be aware of their own penchant towards one or more of these intelligences. Aware of their own strengths and limits, educators will better be able to engage the multiple potentials of their students.

Second, educators need to develop multiple ways of identifying each learner's intelligence profile and then construct multiple pedagogies, each of which is capable of engaging a given learner's or a group of learners' multiple intelligences. In other words, MI theory helps educators to understand that for a student to be fully aware of the learning process, to be actively engaged in the learning process, and to be enriched by it, the learning process must engage the learner's multiple intelligences.

Full and Active Participation

There are several considerations that Gardner’s MI theory brings to the understanding of engaging liturgical preaching. In particular, four such considerations both affirm and challenge present notions about the homily.

Know the assembly

First MI theory affirms the challenge offered in recent preaching theory: the preacher must know the assembly. Specifically, this means that the wants and fears, the hopes and dreams, the living story of the community must be dealt with in a homily. This is to be understood not only during the actual preaching but also in the preparation before and the evaluation after the homily.

It is often said that unless the homilist knows what a community wants to hear, he or she will never be able to preach what the community needs to hear. Gardnerian theory adds a new field to what a preacher needs to know about a praying community. Like a teacher, aware of the intelligence profile of students, the preacher must know what variety of biopsychological potentials are present in a worshipping community. For instance, preaching at the eucharistic celebration for the close of the National Pastoral Musicians Association meeting will be quite different than preaching at the annual Red Mass for lawyers.
Moreover, it is not only the liturgical preacher who can benefit from this implication of Gardner’s theory. MI theory can also assist presiders and those who prepare the liturgy. MI offers valuable insights about engaging the community in the rites by enabling us to understand how to activate the various responses of the different people in the assembly. By becoming critically aware of these various kinds of intelligences present within a community, liturgical leaders will better adapt the rites and the rhetoric towards full and active participation.

**Know yourself**

Gardner’s theory offers an invitation to the preacher to be aware of the operative intelligences that are strong within him or herself. This self-awareness will allow one to know the limits and possibilities of one’s preaching potential. The act of liturgical preaching demands an artistry that engages at the same time several intelligences on the part of the preacher. The linguistic, the bodily, the spatial, the musical, the interpersonal, as well as the intrapersonal intelligences are obviously woven together during a homily. This is true because in any spoken speech act, whether religious or political, the speaker’s several intelligences are working together simultaneously.

Homiletics professors would do well to instill this awareness in their students and to assist them in the development of these intelligences, as well as with the integration of them in the preaching activity. For instance, there are those who teach preaching who insist that their students take singing and dance lessons as a way of developing the skills necessary to become effective preachers. Add to these techniques the growing interest in poetry on the part of liturgical preachers. Reading poetry aloud is a sure way of developing and enriching the linguistic intelligence. Poets are the masters of the kind of language that makes liturgical preaching soar.

**Preaching in context**

MI theory offers a way of thinking realistically about the homily: the homily is not solely responsible for engaging all of the assembly’s intelligences. Rather, the homily must be seen within the larger context of the Sunday eucharistic liturgy. Viewed from this vantage point, one can make the argument that the multiple parts of the Sunday eucharistic liturgy function much like multiple pedagogies, each of which is capable of engaging the assembly’s multiple intelligences (Paulli).

For example, the sign of peace engages the assembly’s bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal intelligences. The worship space engages the assembly’s spatial intelligence. The singing of the gathering song or the responsorial psalm, engage the assembly’s musical intelligence. And the homily, because it involves the use of the spoken word, engages the assembly’s linguistic intelligence. Just as a
teacher need not construct every single lesson plan so that each of the eight intelligences of each of his or her students will be engaged, so too, each part of the liturgy need not be done in such a way that it engages all eight of the assembly’s intelligences.

*More than linguistic intelligence*

While an educational understanding of the liturgy is clear, and its multiple pedagogies evident, a rethinking of the homily as only engaging the linguistic intelligence of the assembly nuances the conversation. The homily is a unique moment in the ritual. It is by far the most congenial element of the liturgy that can be adapted to the communal and the personal needs of the community. Because it involves the spoken word, the homily engages both the preacher’s and the assembly’s linguistic intelligence. This linguistic intelligence involves sensitivity to spoken and written language, the ability to learn languages, and the capacity to use language to accomplish certain goals.

Beyond linguistic intelligence, however, the homily involves other of the preacher’s intelligences. The body gestures, the sound of the voice, the facial expressions, the vesture, for example, are intrinsic to the homily and demonstrate the involvement of several intelligences of the homilist. But is this not also true about the hearers of such speech? Are not their other intelligences also activated by such a spoken event? Here we are at the edge of Gardner’s theory and the capacity of his categories to explain what exactly is happening in the hearers.

The homily has the potential to involve the assembly in a spectrum of intelligent responses. If the homilist can attend to several of the intelligences of the assembly, the homily could engage the community more fully in liturgical participation, both in the hearing of the word and in the sacramental actions that follow. In other words, an expansion of MI theory can help us understand that the homily is not limited to engaging only an assembly’s linguistic intelligence. Rather, as an oral/aural act of communication, the homily engages several intelligences within the preacher and, by consequence, in the assembly.

The homily, therefore, as the art and craft of the spoken word, is capable of engaging the assembly’s multiple intelligences by charging the imagination with rich suggestions of memory that enlarge and expand the ability of the community to respond. Therefore, a preacher does not need to revert to the dialogue homilies of the sixties or seventies to accomplish this end. A preacher does not need to involve supercilious props in the preachment to bring about full and active participation. A preacher need not walk around the church, as if the Sunday eucharistic liturgy were the Jerry Springer show, in order for the faithful to be enriched by the homily. Through the spoken word, delivered in the context of the entire liturgical celebration that so richly attends to the multiple intelligences of the assembly, we contend that the preacher is able to engage the community in full and active participation.
We have seen this potential of liturgical preaching before. It was the attempt on the part of preachers to enliven the imaginations of the hearers with vivid memories of sight, sound, space, touch, relationships and the wisdom of knowing God. It bears an ancient name: mystagogy. Thus, MI theory again invites us to consider the possibility that engaging liturgical preaching is mystagogical preaching.

What does it mean to preach mystagogically? To preach mystagogically is to understand that the spoken word has potential and the power to recall old and create new worlds that exist far beyond the confines of a particular worship event. Mystagogical preaching builds upon ritual experiences that previously engaged the assembly's multiple intelligences. Mystagogical preaching invites the assembly to full and active participation through active listening and surrendering to the spoken word's desire to prompt the memory, penetrate the heart, and prick the imagination.

**The Gospel challenge**

Finally, Gardner's definition of intelligence presents preaching with a gospel-like challenge. Liturgical preaching ultimately is meant to engage the community's multiple intelligences, so that it may have the mind of Christ and live in the Spirit's wisdom. Being nourished by word and sacrament, the community is activated to solve the problems of injustice and suffering and to create God's reign. With a multiplicity of gifts and intelligences, the community's imagination is funded to embody the values of mercy and kindness that alone can transform a culture of death into a culture of life.

May we be worthy of being such ambassadors of life to others, sharing the discipleship of Christ as our greatest praise, and serving the works of justice and mercy as our greatest thanks. After all, is not that what being fully aware of, actively engaged in, and enriched by the liturgy is all about?

**References**


