News

Combination photo: on left Liguori wears Elvis costume and plays guitar; on right he is vested

Deacon Anthony Liguori Jr., also known as "Deacon Elvis," and pictured in an undated combination photo, balances his Catholic ministry in the Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., with a career as a highly regarded Elvis Presley tribute act. (OSV News/courtesy Archdiocese of Newark)

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Deacon Anthony Liguori Jr. is used to new parishioners gawking at him. But he doesn't mind.

He realizes that when people meet a clergyman for the first time, they're not expecting a jet-black pompadour and long sideburns straight out of an earlier era. He knows exactly what they're wondering, too: "Who does this guy think he is, Elvis?"

The answer is "no" — Deacon Liguori does not believe he is "The King" reincarnated. Yet if you ask his fans, they'll tell you that may be the best way to describe him.

That's because when he is not ministering to the faithful of Corpus Christi Parish in Hasbrouck Heights, Liguori is putting on professional, Las Vegas-quality performances as a highly regarded Elvis Presley tribute act. He even toured internationally, portraying Elvis as part of "Legends in Concert," one of the world's premiere tribute shows.

Make no mistake, though, Liguori's faith is anything but performative. Though his appearance might take some aback at first sight, the deacon said people just need to listen to one of his homilies to know his sincerity about improving people's lives through the Gospel. In fact, he said the only trait his vocations have in common is his desire to make people feel good.

"If I can help somebody, whether it's through my diaconate work or my music, that's very important to me," said Liguori, who is also an award-winning country singer. "We all go through trials and tribulations. I just want to touch people's lives and make things a little better for them."

So, how did Liguori become a man of music and God? Both were always part of his life, though the deacon admits he did not reflect much on the latter during his early years.

Then he almost died.

While in college, Liguori suffered a sports injury that twisted his omentum (a sheet of fatty tissue covering abdominal organs), cutting off blood flow to its lower portion. This caused gangrene to set in, which led to Liguori being rushed to the hospital for a life-saving surgery.

While on the operating table, Liguori said, he felt himself rise out of his body and race toward a light, arriving in a magnificent garden. There he spotted Jesus Christ, so he ran over and hugged the Lord. In this embrace, Liguori felt an overwhelming sense of healing and unconditional love. He was completely at peace and ready to return to Earth by the time it was over.

Shortly after, Liguori woke up in a hospital bed. His life was never the same.

"People noticed a change in me right away," Liguori told Jersey Catholic, the news

outlet of the Newark Archdiocese. "The biggest thing was that I became more forgiving to people, and I wanted people to forgive me. I think forgiveness is what life is all about."

His near-death experience also inspired Liguori to return to the Catholic Church, where he immersed himself in parish life. And after marrying and having children, he made sure to put faith at the center of his family.

"His example definitely inspired me to develop my own ministry," said Liguori's son Christian, who now serves alongside his father as Corpus Christi's director of religious education. "I feel privileged to have grown up the way that I did and be formed into the person who I am now."

When the Archdiocese of Newark restarted its diaconate program in the mid-2000s, Liguori decided to enroll, ultimately becoming ordained in 2011. Since then, he has handled everything from baptisms to weddings. And he balances it all with a successful music career, which coincidentally began around the same time as his faith journey.

After playing in a few high school cover bands, Liguori started performing country music (a lifelong love) professionally as a college student in 1982. He signed his first record deal in 1990 and released multiple albums over the succeeding decades.

In addition to the records, Liguori has racked up numerous experiences that would make any singer jealous. These include befriending country icon Clint Black when both were breaking into the industry and making multiple appearances on the "Midnite Jamboree" radio show, a Nashville, Tennessee, institution. He even played with the legendary Marshall Tucker Band for several songs on his first album.

But the artist most synonymous with Liguori's musical career has been Elvis.
The deacon recalled his love for "The King" started as a young boy after watching Presley films like "Speedway." By age 10, he was asking his parents to buy him Elvis albums for Christmas, and by high school, he was playing covers in front of live audiences.

Even after his country music career took off, Liguori continued performing as a tribute act in casinos, cruise ships and theaters.

Today, Liguori performs as Elvis with a band that includes Bill Turner, a former lead guitarist of Bill Haley & His Comets. He even wrote and recorded a song about "The King" titled "Midnight in Memphis," which topped the Cashbox traditional country/outlaw/rockabilly chart for six weeks in 2021.

"I love performing as Elvis, and I plan on doing it until I physically cannot give quality performances anymore," Liguori said, pointing out that his shows are highly taxing because he mimics all of Presley's moves. And while he does not talk like Elvis in between songs — he feels that comes across as fake — the deacon puts much effort into his vocals. "The best compliment you could give me is to say I sounded exactly like him."

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Many of Liguori's fans have told him just that, including one particularly big name. Jerry Foster — who's written multiple No. 1 country hits for the likes of Jerry Lee Lewis and Conway Twitty — said he was blown away when he first heard the deacon sing as Elvis. And that's high praise, considering Foster once shared a meal with Presley in the 1950s.

"I could hardly tell him from Elvis," said Foster, whose time spent with "The King" partially inspired Liguori's "Midnight in Memphis" single. "We later worked a show together where he played an Elvis song called ‘Hurt' that has a lot of range in it. But Anthony hit the highest note perfectly, just like Elvis did. You could almost shut your eyes and think you were listening to Elvis. Everybody loved him at that show."

But what impresses Foster the most is the deacon's benevolence. Though they only met a few years ago, Foster said Liguori has become like a son to him because the deacon is always there when he needs him. They also have bonded over much more than music, regularly discussing faith and the role God plays in their lives.

"I don't think I've run into anyone in my career who has shown more kindness than Anthony does," Foster said. "People are drawn to him because he's so down-to-earth and approachable. He's really a great instrument of God."

Over the past 20 years, Liguori has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for churches, hospitals and nonprofits by playing charity concerts as Elvis. His most recent benefit show earned $10,000 for his own parish, which used the funds for capital improvement projects.

While it might seem strange to think of an Elvis tribute artist doing God's work, Liguori said most people have been immensely supportive. In fact, he said it was the Archdiocese of Newark itself that first called him "Deacon Elvis" while promoting one of his concerts.

Of course, no one can please everyone. Liguori said he occasionally meets Catholics — even some fellow clergy — who do not take him seriously as a deacon when they see his pompadour and sideburns.

But his pastor, Father Kajetan Klein, said he never cared about Liguori's look because he doesn't judge others based on appearances. And in this case, Klein said he feels Liguori's resemblance to Presley is actually an asset for evangelization.

"Jesus Christ multiplied bread not just to feed people but also to gain their attention so they would follow Him," said Klein, who invited Liguori to join him at Corpus Christi Parish because he loved working with him at a previous parish. "Today, there are many people who hear about Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church but have no reason to attend Mass. But when they see a deacon who looks like Elvis Presley, they're going to want to see what a Mass with him is like. And then, when they hear the church's message, maybe they'll want to come back.

"We can't just stay in our parishes — we have to find ways of reaching people outside," Klein continued. "Deacon Anthony is doing that. God gave him the talent to look and sound very similar to Elvis Presley, and he's using that to bring people to the church."

The pastor said his deacon routinely holds music missions with his son in which they preach the Gospel by performing original, faith-based songs and sharing personal stories. He also fundraises for the parish by occasionally selling his albums after Mass and donating 100% of the profits.

Overall, Klein described Liguori as a faithful, creative team member with a tireless passion for supporting the church. He said there is much more to him than being

an Elvis tribute artist.

"I don't want people only to see him as Elvis — I want people to see him as an excellent deacon and a great person," Klein said. "And I don't just say that because he's my friend. I say that because of everything he has done for my congregation. He's very connected to God."

Ironically, Liguori said the most significant way his singing career has affected his diaconate ministry has nothing to do with music. He explained that traveling the world as a musician has allowed him to talk with countless people from various backgrounds. These conversations have made him a good listener, he said, which helps when speaking with parishioners. They have also given him new perspectives on life, which lets him better empathize with others.

Above all, he said hearing so many people's stories has shown him the value of sharing one's experiences, which is a crucial component of his homilies.

"I really like preaching because I can apply stories from my life," Liguori said. "If people relate to what I've been through, it brings them closer to the Gospel. And I think sharing my experiences helps them, too. Like when I talk about my near-death experience at funerals, I can see that it gives the families a lot of hope."

Liguori is currently working on an album devoted to his lifelong fascination with rodeos. And within the next few years, he plans to move full-time to Nashville, where he owns a property called "Rockabilly Ranch." But the deacon said an actual retirement is not in the cards — he enjoys performing too much.

The same goes for his diaconate work. Though he will no longer be serving Corpus Christi, Liguori said he will continue ministering to Catholics at a Nashville church with which he is affiliated.

"My ministry in a nutshell is to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving because that's what Jesus would want us to do," Liguori said. "Most of all, we should love one another like he loved us. That's how I operate my life."