

# The Spirituality of Presence: The Story of Jacopa and Francis

By Darleen Pryds, PhD

**T**his article begins with a public confession. A few years ago, I was asked to write a book about lay Franciscan women, and I completely forgot to include the woman who is arguably the most important lay Franciscan in the tradition: Lady Jacopa dei Settesoli (sometimes spelled Jacoba). I forgot to include her because at the time of my writing that book, I didn't think of Jacopa often, nor did I think much of her. She was, in my mind, the woman who baked almond cookies for Francis. I had reduced her significance to a cookie-baker.

Now, I like cookies as much as most people. I have fond memories of baking cookies with my grandmother when I was a child, so I did not think Jacopa's contributions were completely insignificant. The problem was that I had reduced her role in the Franciscan tradition to a position of quaintness, a position I maintained until I started volunteering at a hospice. Once I witnessed what fellow volunteers offered the dying by their presence at the bedside, and once I understood what the dying could teach me about life when I sat with them, I came to appreciate the real significance of Jacopa's role in the Franciscan tradition: against all the rules and customs of propriety, she chose to be present.

According to five hagiographies of Francis, all linked to his early companions, we know that Francis requested that Jacopa come to be with him as he was reaching the end of his life.<sup>1</sup> The story is told as a miracle: just as a messenger was leaving the friary in Assisi to send for Jacopa in Rome, she miraculously appeared at the door, having understood in a moment of prayer that she would be needed by Francis' side. Only one account, Thomas of Celano's, includes the quaint exchange between Francis and a nervous friar

who was acting as the porter. Concerned that women were not allowed in the friary, the friar asked Francis what he should do with her standing at the threshold. Francis is reported to have said, "Open the doors and bring her in. The decree about women is not to be observed for Brother Jacopa" (EDFA, II, 418).

The five accounts of Jacopa's deathbed visit do not offer great detail as to what she did or how she attended to Francis. We know that she brought him things that would be needed, such as a pillow, a cloth, candles, incense, and of course, the ingredients for almond cookies. But knowing how women served at the bedside of the dying in the Middle Ages and today, we can imagine that she soothed him by wiping his feverish forehead with a wet cloth; she comforted him by placing a pillow under his head; she burned incense to cover up the smell in his room; and she likely bathed him, keeping him clean and as comfortable as possible. We can surmise these tender acts from what she brought with her from Rome.

From our own personal experiences, we might surmise even deeper acts of compassion. She likely held his hand or stroked his arm to offer him comfort. She may have cradled his head and offered him drops of water to ease his parched mouth and lips. And no doubt she prayed. Some of her prayers may have been silent; others she may have sung or spoken out loud. She likely also attended to the friars who were anxiously witnessing the passing of their founder. To alleviate their stress, Jacopa may have gently embraced them or simply put her arm around them, comforting them in their uneasiness. Together they probably broke up these moments of concern and hours of boredom by sharing favorite stories of Francis in order to pass the time as he lay dying.

All of these gestures are such unremarkable tasks and expressions of faith that they mostly went unrecorded, yet she was the one Francis called to be by his side. She was the one Francis knew could provide this care and comfort. She was the one Francis knew loved him with such faith that she could be present to him and to his friars as he passed from this life.

Why is it that Lady Jacopa is so often forgotten? And why is it her name is rarely known outside of the Franciscan family today?

<sup>1</sup> Thomas of Celano's *Treatise on Miracles* (c.1253); *the stories of Brother Leo and Francis' early associates assembled into what is known as the Assisi Compilation* (1240s-1260); Bernard de Bessa's *De Laudibus Beati Francisci* (1277-1283); *Mirror of Perfection* (believed to have been written in the hand of Brother Leo, one of Francis' closest companions); *The Deeds of the Blessed Francis and his Companions* written by Ugolino Boniscambi of Montegiorgio 1328-1337 (which was subsequently reedited into *the Little Flowers of Saint Francis* after 1337).



“Brother Lady Jacopa” / Painting by **Howard Schroeder, SFO**

There are plenty of reasons this lay woman is forgotten today. In fact, there was a concerted effort by early hagiographers to not include her in their accounts of Francis’ death. Thomas of Celano, who penned the first *Life of Francis* at the request of Pope Gregory IX in 1228 and his second *Life* at the request of the order’s General Minister in 1245-7, only included the story of Jacopa in his treatise on the miracles of Francis written around 1253. Even more damaging to the story’s fate was Bonaventure’s account. As minister general of the order, Bonaventure wrote with administrative concerns when he was commissioned by the order’s General Chapter in 1260 to write a definitive account of Francis’s life. The order had already fallen into internal conflicts and had become subject to external criticisms. It is likely that as the shrewd administrator he was, Bonaventure used the opportunity to write the authoritative *Life of Francis* with an eye toward bolstering stability and uniformity in the order. In Bonaventure’s account, Francis dies without any reference to the small acts of kindness and care Jacopa is said to have offered. Instead, Francis’s death is a clerical liturgy among a clerical fraternity.

As an administrator of a growing order that had already attracted admirers and detractors, Bonaventure was understandably committed to protecting the order’s reputation. Widespread knowledge of the presence of a lay woman attending the order’s founder at his death could seem inappropriate. Just as precarious, the story could potentially encourage friars to cultivate special

friendships with laywomen which could lead to widespread scandal. So from an administrator’s perspective, the story of Jacopa and Francis was risky.

But from a different perspective, the story of Jacopa and Francis poignantly reveals a central feature of what makes Franciscan spirituality unique: the humility of presence.


Both Francis and Jacopa offer poignant lessons of humble presence through this story. As the founder of the order, Francis knew very well women were not allowed in the friary. But in his final days, he did not make an idol out of rules, nor did he make an idol out of the virtue of obedience to those rules. He was humble enough to know that authentic faith takes precedence over customs of social propriety. The relationship of faith that he shared with Jacopa was so deep, he wanted her to be close to him as he left this life. Once she was present, Francis allowed her to serve him and tend to his physical needs to ease his transition from this life.

Similarly, Jacopa, a woman of great political power and wealth, also entered the friary with complete humility to serve Francis as if he were her own son. The two were present to one another—the friar and the lay woman—in those final days and hours of Francis’ life.

What would happen to our understanding of Franciscan spirituality if we remembered the story told by his followers of Francis requesting his dear friend and companion in faith, Jacopa, a devout lay woman to be at his side as he was dying? What idols about gender and clericalism could be examined and possibly dissolved if we reflected on this story of Francis and Jacopa? And most importantly, where would we each find ourselves called to be present if we embraced this model of humility and presence illustrated in this story of Francis’ dying and Jacopa’s care?

The story of Jacopa at Francis’ deathbed is rich with possibility since it offers Francis’ final teachings: become humble so as to be really present to one another. In that presence with one another, there is an even greater presence: Christ. But first, we need to be present to one another.

In FOCUS



**Darleen Pryds** is a professor of history and spirituality at the Franciscan School of Theology (Oceanside, CA). Her research focuses on lay Franciscan history with a special interest in lay preaching. She has written several articles two books on lay Franciscan preachers, including *The King Embodies the Word: Robert d’Anjou and the Politics of Preaching* and *Women of the Streets: Early Franciscan Women and their Mendicant Vocation*. In her spare time she plays tennis, enjoys hiking, and volunteers at hospice.

## Follow us on Facebook and Twitter

for news, updates, and exclusive content

[Facebook.com/franciscanconnections](https://www.facebook.com/franciscanconnections)

[@fran\\_connection](https://twitter.com/fran_connection)

