

The pope and me: Claiming acquaintance

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

It's easy to find weird epitaphs in old graveyards, in books of quotations or via the Internet. Samples that come up on a quick Internet search—I don't claim they are actual epitaphs—include: "Here lies Johnny Yeast / Pardon me for not rising." And "Sir John Strange / Here Lies an Honest Lawyer / And that is Strange." And "Harry Edsel Smith: / Looked up the elevator shaft to see if / The car was on the way down. It was."

Those are intended to be funny and weird. I am more impressed by the unfunny but weird. My prize for the weirdest fairly recent one goes to egotist Robyn Astaire, who put on Fred Astaire's tombstone (as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, April 7): "Fred Astaire. I will always love you, my darling. Thank you."

The "my darling" was a reference to Robyn herself, whom Astaire married when he was 81 and she was 35.

Jeffrey Zaslow, who wrote about this epitaph, warned about monument-al name-dropping: "If you want your tombstone to be about you, you'd better speak up." Otherwise someone else will, in the mode of "Enough about him. Let me tell you about me."

I thought about this strategy by which one inflates her or his own importance by latching on to a buried eminence as I watched the burying of Pope John Paul II. It would be hard for anyone to have her or his name engraved next to that of the pope, who lies, we are told, near St. Peter. But during that weeklong burial process we heard from thousands who claimed acquaintance with the late pope, and who told us how important their audiences with him were, and thus how important they are. Picture the epitaphs of some of them: "Here lies Mary Joseph / At whom the pope smiled while serving mass in Grant Park." Or: "Here lies Joseph Mary / Who was in an actual room with the pope during an audience."

Well, here am I, a little Protestant, who had little claim on the pope's attention. This won't be in my directives through power of attorney or family chats, but I could picture it: "Here lies Marty Marty / Who met Cardinal Wojtyla in 1978 / And promptly forgot that he'd done so." Or: " Here lies Marty Marty / Whose presence in a cardinal's chair / Forced the future pope to sit on a rickety folding chair behind him."

That's my claim on John Paul II. Asked once whether I'd ever met him, I said no. Then a fellow conferee at a Vatican event in 1978 sent me a picture of Cardinal Wojtyla craning his neck to see around the cardinal's chair in which I sat, next to five other paper-deliverers at a conference on "The Culture of Unbelief."

There, I've dropped my name among the million others claiming their connection to the pope. While I hope no one has to figure out an end-of-life epitaph for me for a couple of decades, let it be known now: "Pope John Paul II and I shared an abhorrence of name-dropping."