In many ways the afternoon of Saturday, April 2, 2005, was a typical one in the Alexander household. My wife was out running errands, my son was working on a history paper, and I had taken a break from writing to check my e-mail. It was a little after 2:30 pm (Central Time) when I received a message from a Muslim colleague and dear friend. His message was one of “condolences” and “deep sympathy” on the occasion of the death of Pope John Paul II. At the time, I thought nothing of the significance of the fact that the first news of the Pope’s passing reached me, a lifelong Roman Catholic, via the heartfelt concern of a Muslim. My immediate reaction was to send off a quick message to my friend thanking him for his kindness, and then to rush downstairs to the television in order to break my fast from the obsessive and repetitive coverage the major television networks were giving the Pope’s “imminent demise.” I was able to watch barely ten minutes of the news coverage about the Pope’s death before it started. It began slowly, like a trickle, and soon grew into a flood: telephone call after telephone call from Muslim friends, colleagues, and associates from all over the United States. Some were calling as individuals, and some were representing important regional and national Muslim organizations. Each one of them wanted to extend his or her condolences and sympathy to me personally, to Catholic Theological Union where I teach, and to the church, as a whole, on this occasion of grief and loss.

An Extraordinary Gesture of Compassion and Friendship

By itself, this flood of telephone calls, to be followed soon by a flood of e-mails and letters, was extraordinary, but not entirely surprising. What was extraordinary was the fact that Muslims decided to reach out to Christians in this way, despite a long history of confrontation and tension. There has certainly been enough suffering of one people at the hands of the other that it is difficult for either Christians or Muslims to find their way beyond the horizons of centuries of mutual antagonism. For Muslims, in particular, memories of the Crusades, the first of which was instigated and preached by one of John Paul II’s predecessors in the Chair of St. Peter, are still as

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searingly painful today as the events they recall are historically distant. Then there are the fresher memories of the involvement of Catholic and other Christian missionaries in the more historically proximate experience of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western colonialism and imperialism. And then there is the continued involvement of Evangelical Christians in the even more proximate U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Although many Muslims can distinguish between the relatively indigenous Catholic presence in Iraq and the current practices of our Evangelical sisters and brothers in the region, the opportunistic proselytism of the latter besmirches the name and endangers the welfare of all Christians living in the Muslim world. In other words, in light of palpable memories, both old and new, of Christian antipathy toward Islam, an outpouring of Muslim condolences upon the death of a pope can genuinely be described as “extraordinary.”

Two things, however, were completely unsurprising about this outpouring of condolences. The first was that John Paul II was “on the radar screen” of so many Muslims. After all, John Paul II was not only history’s most widely traveled Roman pontiff. He was also the first pope to travel extensively in the Muslim world and whose addresses to Muslims invited the attention of mass media that could and did broadcast his image and his words quite literally “to the ends of the earth.” The second reason I was completely unsurprised was that, by making these calls and sending these e-mails and letters, my Muslim friends and colleagues were simply interacting with their Catholic friends and associates in the same way they would interact with any other individual or community in need. To put it another way, in expressing their condolences, my Muslim friends and colleagues were simply being good Muslims; they were acting out of a deeply ingrained and profoundly Islamic sense of compassion, as well as out of a deeply ingrained and profoundly Islamic sense of the divinely ordained duties inherent in all human relationships.

A Surprising Expression of Solidarity

There was, however, one element of this overwhelming expression of compassion and friendship that was both extraordinary and surprising. The Muslims who spoke to me about John Paul II spoke not only of my loss and the loss of the church, but of theirs as well. In the words of Dr. Muhammad Sayyid Saeed, Secretary General of the Islamic Society of North America: “Muslims will always cherish the late Pope John Paul II for his interventions in the wars of Lebanon, the Persian Gulf, and Bosnia. His strong vocal opposition signaled that the Catholic Church does not identify itself with the interests, cultural ideologies, and wars of any nation.” In the words of a local Muslim leader in Chicago, “I can only imagine how immense a loss it is to the Catholic community . . . Equally great is the shock to the rest of the world that benefited from his spirituality, moral uprightness, and bold stand on issues of morality and human rights.” “With [his] passing,” wrote yet another Muslim leader, “the world has lost a flame that warmed and guided the multitudes. During his final hours, the world witnessed a man who passed away as he lived—with dignity, honor, respect, and total surrender to God.”

To put it simply, these Muslims were reaching out to their Catholic sisters and brothers, not only in compassion and friendship. They were actually going one important step further. To use a term that was at the heart of John Paul II’s teachings about justice and peace in “the human
family,” one can safely say that these Muslims and the many more whom they represent were and are reaching out to Catholics in solidarity. What these Muslims were and are saying is that they not only understand John Paul II’s vision for Christian-Muslim relations, but they embrace it as well.

In *Nostra Aetate*, a document which marks a revolutionary shift in Catholic approaches to “non-Christian religions,” the fathers of the Second Vatican Council sounded the call for Christians and Muslims “to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all [humanity] social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (no. 3).

John Paul II dutifully heeded this call, and, to a significant degree, dedicated his papacy to its implementation. With the implicit, and in some cases explicit encouragement of this Pope, Catholic-Muslim dialogue has gradually become a feature of the established religious landscape in many parts of the world. Not only has the Vatican entered into an official dialogue with al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the oldest and most prestigious in the Muslim world, but Catholic bishops’ conferences in places as widely diverse in sociopolitical context as the United States and the Philippines, Australia and Nigeria, and Indonesia and the U.K., have been involved in expanding dialogue and cooperation between Christians and Muslims for almost two decades, and in some cases even longer.

In the U.S. alone, a major center for “Muslim-Christian Understanding” has been established at a major Catholic university (i.e., Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.) and a program in “Catholic-Muslim Studies” has been established at the nation’s largest Catholic graduate school of theology and ministry (i.e., Catholic Theological Union in Chicago). In this past year, CTU’s program has enjoyed financial support from three of the five major Islamic centers in the greater Chicago area. It has also welcomed two Muslim scholars as adjunct professors of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, and is celebrating the accomplishments of its growing constituency of Muslim students and graduates from places such as Thailand, Indonesia, the West Bank, and Turkey.

In addition to Georgetown and CTU, there are also more than a few smaller Catholic universities, particularly those which find themselves with a growing Muslim student constituency (e.g., the University of Saint Thomas in St. Paul, MN), which are beginning to explore the establishment of programs in Catholic-Muslim dialogue and understanding.

Without a meaningful and sustained Muslim outreach of solidarity, none of these efforts would have made it much past their respective infancies. Given this extensive Muslim outreach of solidarity, I should not have been in the least surprised by what my Muslim friends and colleagues said about John Paul II and the degree to which they embraced his vision of Christian-Muslim relations. What felt like a surprise was really my own epiphany that John Paul II had indeed managed to create a global ethos, as modest and tenuous as it may be, of sincere Catholic-Muslim solidarity.

Is Change Really Taking Place at the Grassroots Level?

On the Second Sunday of Easter and the Feast of Divine Mercy instituted by John Paul II, I found myself as a guest in the studios of Radio Islam, a Chicago-area call-in radio talk show. The show’s producers had decided to preempt their weekly Sunday arts show to devote an entire program to the memory of John Paul II.
Within the context of a discussion of the impact John Paul II has had on Christian-Muslim relations, the first caller asked what I thought of the opinion of many pundits whom he had heard suggesting that, while the Pope had said and done some “nice things about Christians and Muslims learning to get along better,” this has had very little impact “at the grassroots level.” I told the caller that I thought this would depend on how one defined the “grassroots.” If, as some would have it, the increasing number of people who are regularly participating in dialogue events are, by definition, “elites,” then I suppose the cynics are right. If, however, the “grassroots” includes college students planning campus dialogues, Catholic and other Christian parishes asking me to help build ties with the local mosques, a group of suburban Christian and Jewish senior citizens who want to learn more about Islam, and a retired professor of anesthesiology and grandmother who seems to spend every waking moment (if she ever sleeps at all) organizing dialogue events as simple as dinners at her home and as complex as interfaith dinners at conferences with tens of thousands of attendees, then the cynics must be wrong.

What the Future Holds

Astute critics may contend that a portrait of growing Catholic-Muslim solidarity is an easy portrait for an American Catholic to paint. This is the case, they would say, because it is in the best interests of American Muslims to reach out to their Christian neighbors in friendship and solidarity. Some would even underscore the sad but true reality that, in a post 9-11 world, the very survival of Muslims in the Western diaspora depends on it. But what about those many parts of the Muslim world, they would ask, where Christians and Christian communities are vulnerable to scorn, discrimination, persecution, and violence at the hands of their Muslim neighbors? Where are the expressions of solidarity here? There can be no doubt that the call of Nostra Aetate for Christian-Muslim solidarity is infinitely more a sober challenge to be met than it is an intoxicating dream coming true.

As Catholic theologian Robert Schreiter reminds us, in those places in the world ravaged by centuries of colonialism and interreligious conflict and violence, injustice has to stop and history has to be re-remembered in order for any kind of reconciliation between Christians and Muslims to take place and any movement of solidarity between the two to take root. In the meantime, however, the politics of human solidarity are essentially, like any other politics, the art of the possible. In those societies, such as in the U.S., which are fortunate enough to be free from the legacy of a long history of mutual mistrust, the robust efforts at Christian-Muslim solidarity must continue to grow. In those societies where mutual animosity is high, even the most modest efforts in dialogue must continue to lay the foundation of hope for a future of reconciliation and solidarity, as distant as it may sometimes appear to be.

As I sit writing this, the cardinals are coming to an end of the first day of the conclave that will elect John Paul II’s successor. By the time this essay is published, Rome will have a new bishop and the Catholic Church a new universal pastor. May God grant him the vision and courage to continue John Paul II’s commitment to Catholic-Muslim solidarity as a sine qua non of the solidarity of the human family.