To our Muslim brothers and sisters:

As-salaamu ‘alaykum! Peace be with you!

As Director of the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies at St. Bonaventure University, it gives me great pleasure to extend our greetings to you as you begin your celebration of the holy month of Ramadan.

This year our letter comes to you at a time when together we are experiencing great sadness and struggle in the world as we remember the many people of all faiths who have succumbed to the COVID-19 virus over the past few months, and the many more who are suffering illness even now. We pray with you for those who have died (may Allah have mercy on them), for those who mourn their passing, and for the health and wellbeing of you and your families.

In addition to claiming the lives of so many and disrupting our daily lives of work and study, and caring for our families, the pandemic has also dramatically affected the way we pray and worship. Around the world, holy places are empty. As the Christian community worldwide recently celebrated Holy Week and Easter without public liturgies, now you are observing the month of Ramadan in a similarly simple and stark fashion. It is, in many ways, the antithesis of Ramadan which traditionally draws people together in great numbers to pray and break the daily fast with iftar.

The friars at St. Bonaventure University who have celebrated such times with you will also feel the void this year. We remember with great happiness sharing iftar with the Islamic Society of the Southern Tier, allowing us to come to know you (al-Ḥujurāt 49.13), not only as neighbors and as partners in building peace, but as brothers and sisters, as the children of Ibrahim/Abraham (upon him be peace!). These experiences have enriched our lives of faith and prayer.

Even as we are physically separated from our respective religious communities and from one another, we must encourage one another to spend this time in frequent and deep prayer (al-Insān 76.25-26), remembering our God who calls each one of us into relationship with Him through prayer, for this is at the essence of our religious observances. During this sacred time, Allah also calls us into relationship with one another. Although physically distant from one another now, we can nevertheless remain united with one another in a spirit of peace, justice, and love, caring for one another in a world that often seems careless and even cruel.

We are grateful for the tremendous support the Islamic Society of the Southern Tier gives to the Center for Arab and Islamic Studies as we continue to promote a deep appreciation and understanding of Arab and Islamic cultures, and respectful relations between Muslim and Christian people. We pray that very soon we can continue to plan programs together to further this mission. This year, we are especially grateful for the heroic care that the many Muslim doctors in the Olean and Allegany medical community are providing during this pandemic, risking their lives in order to save others.

During this Easter season and the month of Ramadan, let us be united in our faith in God who does not abandon us to darkness and death, but who sends to us His holy prophets and reveals to
us His Holy Scriptures to illumine our hearts and minds, and assure us that He will bring life from death:

   He brings the living from the dead, and brings the dead from the living, and He gives life to the earth after its death, and so shall you be brought forth. (al-Rūm 30.19)

Our respective celebrations of Easter and Ramadan both use the symbol of light to express this faith. The fire and candle used at the Easter Vigil and the lantern of Ramadan (Arabic, *fanous*) remind us of the light of faith and hope in the midst of the darkness.

We wish you a most blessed Ramadan. *Ramadan Mubarak! Ramadan Kareem!*

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