Every year on Jan. 20, the Catholic Church honors St. Fabian, a pope who was martyred (d. 250 CE) by the Roman emperor Decius, and St. Sebastian (d. 287 CE) who was martyred not long after by the emperor Diocletian.

At Mass that morning, as I reflected on the terrible persecutions the Romans exacted upon the early Christians, I recalled how early Muslims likewise faced hardships inflicted upon them by those in Mecca who rejected the message of the Qur’an and the messenger, the prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Ultimately, Muslims were forced to seek asylum in the Christian Kingdom of Abyssinia (615 CE), and later in the Arabian city of Yathrib (Medina) in 622 CE.

The day before I presided at Mass I learned of a modern-day martyr, a Kenyan schoolteacher, named Salah Farah. His name had first appeared in the news almost a month before, on Dec. 22; but in those hectic days before Christmas, many (including myself) had missed his story.

Salah was returning from a business trip by bus when members of al-Shabaab, a Somali-based terrorist group affiliated with al-Qaeda, shot through the windshield and demanded the driver to stop. As the bus came to a halt, Muslim women on board quickly gave headscarves to the Christian women to help disguise their religious identity. Others were hidden behind luggage in the bus. Since Kenya has contributed troops to the U.N. and African Union military missions in Somalia, al-Shabaab now targets Kenyan Christians in revenge.

After ordering the passengers off the bus, the hijackers told them to separate into two groups — Christians on one side, Muslims on the other. Salah and the other Muslims refused to leave the Christian passengers, telling their captors to “kill all of us or leave us alone.” In frustration, the attackers withdrew, but not before shooting Salah in the hip.

When asked why he protected the Christians, he said: “We are brothers… It’s only religion that is the difference, so I ask my brother Muslims to take care of the Christians so that the Christians also take care of us … and let us help one another and let us live together peacefully.”

Nearly a month after the attack, Salah died from complications of his injury — a Muslim martyr, dying as a faithful Muslim defending the lives of others. I was grieved by the news of his passing, although not surprised by his actions. History tells us that in many parts of the world, and throughout the centuries, Christians and Muslims have lived together, worked and studied together, governed and fought for justice together, and accomplished great things together.

History also tells us that, in the past as well as in the present, when relations between Muslim and Christian communities have been scarred by violence, it is not due to a “clash of civilizations,” but rather a clash of empires and agendas, competing quests for social, political, military, and economic power.
According to the Qur’an, those who believe in God, who believe in the Last Day, and who do righteous deeds — whether Muslim, Christian or Jew — “shall have their reward from God; they shall not fear nor shall they grieve.”

When Salah Farah protected his Christian compatriots from execution, he did the most righteous of deeds: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15.13).” Salah lived — and died — true to his name, for “salad” means “righteous” in Arabic. He is a martyr to be honored by Muslims and Christians alike.

According to the Qur’an, those who believe in God, who believe in the Last Day, and who do righteous deeds — whether Muslim, Christian or Jew — “shall have their reward from God; they shall not fear nor shall they grieve.”

Michael D. Calabria, O.F.M., Ph.D.
Director, Center for Arab and Islamic Studies
St. Bonaventure University