

## **An obituary and a tribute to J. Severino Croatto for JOLAH**

By Samuel Almada

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*These lines are a tribute to a member of the JOLAH (Journal of Latin American Hermeneutics) editorial board and one of the principal driving forces behind it. We recently remembered José Severino Croatto on his birthday (19 March), and it will soon be a year since he left us (26 April). We also remember the commotion following his death, and would like to take this opportunity to once again thank those of you who sent the countless condolences and messages of support we received from around the world.*

One development over this last year was a website dedicated to Severino's work, [www.severinocroatto.com.ar](http://www.severinocroatto.com.ar). This site provides a forum for research and debate, and includes many of Severino's published articles, his bio, and messages from his friends, students and colleagues. Special thanks go to Severino's son, Juan, for his efforts and help designing and developing this site which we know will prove immensely useful. Finally, Severino's last book, *Los primeros cielos y la primera tierra* (The first heavens and the first earth), a reworked and enhanced version of his commentary on Genesis 1, is being printed by Lumen in Buenos Aires.

Severino was an inspired and inspiring teacher, a passionate person, and an activist for life. His dedication to studying and teaching are probably what he will be remembered for the most. He was always keen on new developments in his field and, and invariably happy to exchange with anyone and everyone. His authority sprung naturally from his erudition, and from his unswerving commitment to his allegiances. He was also a creator: he ranked among the theologians who gave birth to the paradigm of Latin American biblical hermeneutics which accompanied Liberation Theology and remains an undisputed reference for biblical studies to this day. His scientific and academic rigour was admirable, yet he never overlooked the people's perspective while building and articulating knowledge.

It is only fair to acknowledge that some of Severino's work was indeed controversial, especially his critical approach to the Bible and how it was articulated in traditional Christian theology. That aspect, however, undoubtedly spurred new challenges and prompted us to read the Bible more conscientiously. It paved the road for exchanges with other disciplines and other sacred writings, and for probing the Bible's relevance in the light of contemporary realities. In any case, it prodded us to probe our own beliefs and opened the door to a more mature experience of things sacred.

Severino was a brother and a fellow traveller. He believed in freedom and that everyone can surpass her or himself. Ecumenism came naturally to him. He was invariably happy to help, even with simple everyday concerns. Born and bred in the country, he was an uncomplicated man. He never lost his soft spot for the earth and for nature in general. He was a self-effacing man who did not boast of his achievements. He never used a title before his name.

Severino has left recollections and footprints in our hearts as well as in his writing. They will no doubt kindle or rekindle our experience of faith and our dedication to serving others. If we had to condense Severino's Christian thought and allegiance in one biblical passage, the Magnificat would certainly encapsulate much of what he believed and stood for. In Mary's words, *"With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Saviour. He cares for me, his humble servant. From now on, all people will say God has blessed me. God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy. He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him. The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud. He drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in places of power. God gives the hungry good things to eat, and sends the rich away with nothing"* (Lk. 1:46-53).

### **A biographical sketch of J. Severino Croatto (\* 19/03/1930 – † 26/04/2004)**

Severino Croatto was born in Sampacho, a town in the Argentine province of Córdoba. He was the eighth of ten children born to a family of farming immigrants.

He read Philosophy and Theology at the *Seminario de los Vicentinos*, a Vincentian seminary in Escobar, Buenos Aires, between 1948 to 1953, then earned the equivalent of a BA in Theology at UCA, Argentina's Roman Catholic University, in 1954. He earned an MA in Biblical Science at the Pontifical Biblical Institute of Rome in 1957, and then pursued postgraduate studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1958. His archaeological research took him to Egypt, Greece, Crete, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon Iraq, Jordan and Israel (1957-1958). He likewise took part in excavations in Jerusalem (1961) and Gezer (1965) alongside Y. Aharoni and G. E. Wright.

Back in Argentina, he taught Old Testament (at the *Colegio Máximo* in San Miguel between 1962 and 1964), Philosophy and History of Religions (at the University of Buenos Aires' School of Philosophy and Arts between 1964 and 1973), Old Testament, Hebrew Language and Phenomenology of Religion (at ISEDET in Buenos Aires starting in 1975, and as emeritus professor since 1995), Comparative Religions (at the Maimónides University's School of Oriental Studies in Buenos Aires between 1994 and 1996), History and Theory of Religion (at *Academia del Sur* in Buenos Aires starting in 1996) and Christian Worldview and Biblical Exegesis (at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary in Buenos Aires starting in 1997).

His primary fields of academic interest were Ancient Middle-Eastern history and culture, languages both classical (Latin and Greek) and Semitic (Hebrew, Aramaic, Acadian, Ugaritic and Arabic), the phenomenology of religion and comparative religions, biblical exegesis, and biblical hermeneutics from a Latin American perspective. His academic work was prolific: he sat on evaluation committees and juries, mentored BA, MA and PhD theses, delivered more than 300 conferences and took part in countless lecture cycles, workshops and symposia around the world. He regularly worked with *Lectura Popular de la Biblia en América Latina*, a movement for the popular reading of the Bible in Latin America, running intensive courses, and published exegeses in *Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana (RIBLA)*.

Severino wrote more than 20 books, and edited, compiled and translated many others. He contributed to dozens of collective books, and wrote hundreds of articles in magazines both specialised (*Revista Bíblica*, *RIBLA* and *Cuadernos de Teología* mainly) and general. He likewise wrote reviews on countless books, and theses and essays were in turn written about his work and thought. More about his work and writing can be found in *Itinerario de J. Severino Croatto* published by Guillermo Hansen, *Los caminos inexhaustibles de la Palabra (Las relecturas creativas en la Biblia y de la Biblia)*, a festschrift for J. Severino Croatto, Lumen-ISEDET, Buenos Aires, 2000, pp. 611-658.

### **Selected books and translations into other languages**

\* *Alianza y experiencia salvífica en la Biblia* (Paulinas, 1964).

\* *Historia de la salvación* (Paulinas, 7 editions between 1966 and 1983). Translated as *História da salvação* (Paulinas, Caxias do Sul, 1967), *Geschiedenis van de verlossing* (H. Nelissen, Bilthoven, 1968) and *Storia della salvezza* (Morcelliana, Brescia, 1972).

\* *Liberación y libertad. Pautas hermenéuticas* (Mundo Nuevo, Buenos Aires, 1973; CEP, Lima 1978 y 1980). Translated as *Exodus: A Hermeneutic of Freedom* (Orbis Books, NY, 1981) and *Êxodo. Uma hermenêutica da liberdade* (Paulinas, SP, 1983).

\* *El hombre en el mundo I: Creación y designio* (A Commentary on Genesis I) (La Aurora, Buenos Aires, 1974).

- \* *Hermenéutica Bíblica. Para una teoría de la lectura como producción de sentido* (La Aurora, Buenos Aires, 1984). Revised editions: Lumen, Buenos Aires, 1994 and 2000. Translated as *Hermenéutica bíblica* (Sinodal-Paulinas, São Leopoldo-São Paulo, 1986); *Biblical Hermeneutics. Toward A Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (Orbis Books, NY 1987, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1995, reprint 1999) and *Die Bibel gehört der Armen. Perspektiven einer befreiungstheologischen Hermeneutik* (Chr. Kaiser Verlag, Munich, 1989).
- \* *Crear y amar en libertad. Estudio de Génesis 2:4-3:24* (La Aurora, Buenos Aires, 1986).
- \* *Isaías: La palabra profética y su relectura hermenéutica. Vol. I: 1-39: El profeta de la justicia y de la fidelidad* (Vozes, Petrópolis, 1989; La Aurora, Buenos Aires, 1989).
- \* *Métodos exegéticos* (with René Krüger) (EDUCAB-ISEDET, Bs As, 1993). Reprinted with R. Krüger and N. Míguez (ISEDET, Buenos Aires, 1996).
- \* *Isaías. La palabra profética y su relectura hermenéutica. Vol. II: 40-55: La liberación es posible* (Lumen, Buenos Aires, 1994). Translated as *Isaías. A palavra profética e sua releitura hermenéutica. Vol. II: 40-55 A libertação é possível* (CBIAT; Vozes, Petrópolis, 1998).
- \* *Las culturas del antiguo Próximo Oriente, desde los orígenes hasta la conquista romana de Jerusalén (63 a.C.)* (EDUCAB-ISEDET, Buenos Aires, 1994).
- \* *Los lenguajes de la experiencia religiosa (Enfoque fenomenológico)* (Fundación Abierta y a Distancia "Hernandarias", Buenos Aires, 1994). Translated as *As linguagens da experiência religiosa. Uma introdução à fenomenologia da religião* (Paulinas, São Paulo, 2001).
- \* *Historia de salvación. La experiencia religiosa del pueblo de Dios* (Verbo Divino, Estella, 1995) (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2001).
- \* *Exilio y sobrevivencia. Tradiciones contraculturales en el Pentateuco* (A commentary on Genesis 4-11) (Lumen, Buenos Aires, 1997).
- \* *Imaginar el futuro. Estructura retórica y querigma del Tercer Isaías* (A commentary on Isaiah 56-66) (Lumen, Buenos Aires, 2001).
- \* *Hermenéutica Práctica. Los principios de la hermenéutica en ejemplos* (RECU-Verbo Divino, Quito, 2002).
- \* *Experiencia de lo sagrado y tradiciones religiosas. Estudio de fenomenología de la religión* (Verbo Divino, Estella, 2002).
- \* *Los primeros cielos y la primera tierra.* A reworked and enhanced version of his commentary on Genesis 1 (posthumous, currently being published at Lumen, Buenos Aires, 2005).

Translated by Richard Flight