

36. Javier L Egana

After the work I had to do at the Vicariate of Solidarity, I became its first executive secretary in 1976, and I was there until 1981. It was a very defining experience. Very, very intense as well. After three and a half years, I left and went to Rome to work at an International News Agency. I was the Secretary-General of that agency, Interpres Service, and I returned from there in early 1985. We were in a very complex moment in the country's history. Let's not forget that in 1986, the Communist Party announced that it would be the decisive year, and it was believed that they could overthrow the dictatorship, along with popular pressure. However, it turned out to be a failure because the Carrizal incident occurred, with the smuggling of weapons, and the assassination attempt failed in Cajón del Maipo. There was a strong repression, even stronger than what had been experienced during the protests that started in 1983. We had already been protesting for three years, but in 1986, there was a significant downturn, and the conclusion was reached that the armed path advocated by some groups had no future against a fairly consolidated military government. People began to think about finding a different path.

According to the 1980 Constitution, a plebiscite had to be held in 1988, in which Pinochet hoped to be confirmed for another eight years. The previous consultation in 1980 had been a scandal. There was doubt because no dictator calls a plebiscite thinking they will lose. No, he called the plebiscite absolutely sure that he would be confirmed. However, there were groups of political leaders who were growing at that time and started to reflect on the situation. They said, "Let's win the plebiscite," but others thought it was absurd and that they couldn't win the plebiscite. There was no electoral register. However, the regime opened up to initiate a process of voter registration to give legitimacy to this consultation. So, a committee was formed, the Committee for Free Elections, which emphasized the need to register in the electoral rolls. There was a division among the opposition. Some said it was absurd and that it would play into Pinochet's hands, consolidating him in power. Others said that if all those who opposed Pinochet registered, we would win, because we are the majority. However, Pinochet could simply reject the results. He could say it was not valid. He had the power to do anything. He couldn't execute everyone either. But in this field that is getting drawn out, let's make the effort. In that context, with a group of people and with the operational base of the Latin American Institute of Social Studies and ILADES, which belongs to the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), we organized a small group to see how the Church could join this effort. We came up with the idea of creating an education and civic participation program promoted by the Church. We started by consulting the Church authority in Santiago, and then it spread throughout the country. This program was called Belén. I believe that until this day, many people are not familiar with it.

It was kept under strict confidentiality to ensure it would never be eliminated. The government understood what we were doing, although I believe they underestimated it. Our work involved first convincing the population through church channels that it was essential to register and, secondly, that it was crucial to participate and vote. Many people had forgotten what an election was. So, we had a comprehensive training plan to explain the importance of registering and how to vote. We made cardboard ballot boxes and set up the famous booths where people vote behind a curtain to maintain secrecy. We started organizing training courses for coordinators at the national level. They would then return to their regions and conduct regional courses within the dioceses. Why is it called Belén? This idea came to us one day. If you look at Luke 2, you realize that Bethlehem came about because Joseph and Mary, Mary being about to give birth, traveled to the place where they had to register,

coincidentally because the emperor of the time was named Augustus, just like the dictator here. So, our large posters were an exact copy of what Luke 2 said. "The emperor Augustus has called for a census in which all the inhabitants must register and participate." That was the public image, but nobody in the government really understood it because it was deeply religious.

I gave talks in many places, starting with this story. "The emperor Augustus has called for a census, and that's why Jesus and Mary traveled to their hometown, which is Bethlehem. Here, the emperor Augustus has called for a plebiscite, and we have to register." This spread within the Church, and all the bishops participated. This program culminated in a plan for election day, where we designed a system to be alert to possible government interventions aimed at nullifying the popular vote. We formed working teams and were present in five different locations within the Church in Santiago. I asked the Permanent Committee of the Episcopal Conference to vote early if they were outside Santiago, and those in Santiago also voted early. The whole day was spent at the offices of the Permanent Committee without moving, with coffee, lunch, and everything. We said, "At any moment, anything can happen, and the Church will have to make a statement." We had very sharp and committed bishops, and at that time, the Permanent Committee was presided over by Bishop Carlos González, a great bishop who was the bishop of Talca. He is a very good friend, and he provided strong support. Sergio Contreras, the bishop of Temuco, was the secretary-general, so we had a very important team. We had a couple of priests who were trusted by them, Fernando Montes from the Jesuits, Percival Cable from the Sacred Hearts, and Alejandro González, who was the head of the legal department at the Vicariate.

In that place, we had a team that would gather for a 15-minute meeting where I would deliver the information. What information did we provide? We planned observers throughout the country. So, we had cards made that were filled out every hour, indicating if there were any demonstrations, electricity was working, if there were any voting issues, what was the attitude of the Armed Forces, what were the actions of the Carabineros. That information was filled out every hour and sent to our central office. With that, we prepared a national report and informed the bishops, usually around 11 a.m. We would say, "Look, there is an approximate turnout of so many thousands of people in the country. Public transportation is running, not completely, but it's functioning. There have been no power outages. Apparently, the country is calm and everything is running smoothly." They wouldn't know anything beyond that. We would inform our teams. We had a team solely focused on monitoring what the radios were reporting. They would sit in a large room wearing headphones, listening and taking notes of what the radios were saying. Every half hour, they would switch, as it was a very demanding task. We also had another team in front of the television screen, watching what was being broadcasted and preparing hourly reports. We had territorial information and information from the media, which was crucial in understanding how the government would handle the media for this.

Well, this lasted until four or five in the afternoon, where we had highly qualified people, for example, Engel, who chaired the Transparency Commission under President Bachelet's administration. He is a very astute man, and we asked him to conduct an analysis that was very challenging because the voter registration was new. When the registrations were old, one automatically knew how Table 1 in Ñuñoa would vote because it had been configured over many elections. But now, people had registered in different tables. No one knew how the tables would react, but he conducted a study. He determined which tables in each electoral district of the country could give us some guidance, and we ended up with a group of 660 tables. We had 660 observers in each of those tables, and their mission was to report on how the electoral process was functioning but, more importantly, to deliver the results as soon as

possible. This brilliant engineer would make projections based on the voting trend. He would say, "If the vote goes this way, it could lead to this outcome." We managed to gather very, very precise information. In fact, our system remained impeccable throughout the entire country. The "No" campaign had some problems where their system crashed at some point, and they rushed to the Episcopal Conference asking, "What data do you have?" We shared the information with anyone who wanted it.

We managed to prevent a couple of situations that would have been very, very complex. At some point, we received information through the channels we had. They said, "Look, there are problems in Legua Emergenia." Later, the media reported that it had been detected that a bus filled with armed extremists had entered Legua Emergenia, and at that moment, the government had given orders to surround the population and enter. That would have meant indiscriminate slaughter because, first of all, the bus was a lie; no bus with armed people had ever entered, and we knew that because we told the vicar of that area and our representative to go to Legua Emergenia and check the information. They checked it. And we called the general in charge of the Carabineros and told him that the information provided by the government was false. The Church knows it is not true. We have an episcopal vicar in the population, and we have our people there. There are no armed individuals or strange buses. We warned him because we have a statement ready to release at any moment. If the Carabineros were to act in Legua, we would warn that they had been informed and that they had committed this brutality. He didn't say anything like, "No, not me, I..." He said they would check the information. Check it because it's false. Nothing happened. Then they said that a car with armed extremists was on its way to Maipú. Another lie. The government was trying to provoke acts of violence to ultimately decree that, under these circumstances, the plebiscite could not be completed. They didn't succeed, and early on, we had information based on the reports that came from the tables that we had won with tranquility.

This started to drag on. All the Carabineros withdrew from the center of Santiago around nine-thirty at night, which immediately raised fears that there would be a self-coup and that Pinochet would declare the plebiscite null, and he would continue being the owner of this country. On television that night, a right-wing leader who had been Pinochet's Interior Minister, Onofre Jarpa, in a conversation with Patricio Aylwin, said, "I have to admit, Patricio, that you won, the 'no' won. I have that information from our party. So, congratulations. We hope this doesn't bring any consequences." The government didn't provide any information, and the only official information that was announced around nine at night was that the "yes" side was winning, which was an overwhelming lie. And then they said, "We will provide information every hour." It was never delivered, and the information was delayed until 2 a.m., when Cardemil, who was the Deputy Minister of the Interior, came out and announced the result that we had. The "no" had won. Throughout the process, our interest was that ideally, no one would know about it except through the channels we had because it was logical that the government would create problems for an operation like this, focused on civic education, inviting people to participate and register. I believe they didn't know, and even today, very little is known except for one instance from '88 until now when some newspaper published a chronicle titled "Operation Belén" and described in general terms what was done, but nothing more has been known since then.

I believe it left us very happy because we did a very professional and serious job that served the country, no doubt about it. It mobilized sectors of the Church that were dormant, that were rather focused on the struggle between the Communist Party and others. It was difficult to get the Communists on board

with this democratic scheme of getting rid of Pinochet with a pencil. Pinochet was defeated not with an AK rifle but with a pencil. Everyone put a little mark where it said "no," and boom! The dictatorship fell. That's when we started preparing for the 1989 election. For that election, we reassembled the Belén team for vote counting and situational information, which were the ongoing situations in the country. We had the results of the '89 election very early, very quickly. We already knew a bit about how the polling stations had behaved, so Engel was able to work more focused, and we knew the results very early on. It wasn't just the presidential results, but also the parliamentary results because we also covered that information. That's what I could tell you about what we did in '88, which very few people know about.