



Premier of Alberta Danielle Smith, accompanied by other Council of the Federation members, speaks to reporters at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, Feb. 12, 2025. (AP photo/Ben Curtis, file)

by Christopher Guly

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The five Catholic bishops of Alberta are calling on Catholic residents of the western Canadian province to use "prayer, an informed conscience and sincere concern for their neighbours" when they vote in an Oct. 19 provincial referendum that asks 10 questions, ranging from restrictions on immigration to whether or not Alberta should begin the formal process of separating from Canada.

"Decisions concerning health care, education, and public resources should promote equitable access and responsible stewardship, with due regard for future generations," said the bishops in an Oct. 1 [pastoral letter](#).

"Legitimate concerns about resources and access to public services merit careful consideration. They must be addressed in ways that respect human dignity and avoid making any segment of our population the object of resentment or blame," they said.

Five of the 10 questions on the referendum ballot address immigrants.

One of the questions asks Albertans whether the province should take more control over immigration "for the purposes of decreasing immigration to more sustainable levels, prioritizing economic migration and giving Albertans first priority on new employment opportunities." Another question asks whether the Alberta government should introduce a law "mandating that only Canadian citizens, permanent residents and individuals with an Alberta-approved immigration status will be eligible for provincially funded programs, such as health care, education and other social services."

In their letter, the bishops state that "a person's worth does not depend on citizenship, income, ability or contribution to society."

"We ask you to consider particularly how the proposals may affect children, people living in poverty, the sick and those who are isolated," it adds. In a statement to the National Catholic Reporter, Sam Blackett, press secretary to Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, said that "the questions on immigration simply address the current unsustainable immigration levels in Canada that are putting real pressures on critical public services. These questions also reflect feedback we heard from Albertans during the Alberta Next townhalls," that took place in the summer. When she announced the non-binding referendum in February, Smith said that "Alberta and our taxpayers shouldn't be expected to foot the bill for federal experiments in open borders."

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Archbishop Stephen Hero of Edmonton, said issues, such as adequate housing, play a role in government decision-making on immigration.

The bishops' letter states that "legitimate concerns about resources and access to public services merit careful consideration," but they "must be addressed in ways that respect human dignity and avoid making any segment of our population the object of resentment or blame."

Hero told NCR that Canada welcomes "a lot of Catholic immigrants and people on work visas, including clergy, and they contribute to society." He added that he hopes the ecclesiastical letter will encourage Catholic Albertans "to think about the common good."

The archbishop noted that Alberta's bishops informed Smith and Mickey Amery, the province's justice minister, that they would issue a pastoral letter about the referendum.

Bishop Gary Franken of St. Paul said the letter by Alberta's prelates is not intended to tell the province's residents how to vote in the referendum.

"We're not so much trying to directly influence any specific answer as we are trying to influence people's thought process — to make sure that they're bringing Gospel values, social justice issues to bear when they look at the questions that are being asked in the referendum," he said.

"So, if someone is looking at this document as a guide on how to vote, that would be wrong. If they're looking at this as a reminder of things to take into account when they think about how to vote, then this is very valuable."

Franken said that Alberta's bishops decided to issue the letter in response to requests from Catholics in the province for a statement on the referendum.

According to the 2021 Canadian census, there were about 830,000 Catholics in Alberta, accounting for approximately 20% of the province's population.

[Statistics Canada](#) reported that as of July 1, Alberta's population was 5,101,050.

Franken said that he is concerned about the questions being asked in the referendum. "They are very much about how we wish to see our society structured and formed for the people who live here and for the people who will be coming here," he said.

"The biggest concern is, will people who have opinions go to the polls and make themselves heard?"

For those that do, Hero said that differences of opinions must be respected, whether it's within parishes or families — and, as the pastoral letter states, "not become occasions to demean another person or call their faith into question."

On Sept. 29, Alberta's three Anglican bishops also [issued a pastoral letter](#) about the referendum.

"We do not normally address particular political issues in this public way, but this upcoming vote is different. This is a unique moment in the life of our province in which we are being asked a series of questions that, each in different ways, come down to choosing what kind of society we want to be," said the letter, which calls on "disciples of Christ" to reflect on the referendum questions "with a concern for the Common Good" and on how "our decisions will impact all our neighbours – especially those who are most vulnerable."

Advance voting for Alberta's referendum began Oct. 13.