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In a joint letter to Congress March 20, the chairmen of three committees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said they oppose the Equality Act because while it is meant to provide protections to those who identify as LGBT, it would impose "sweeping regulations to the detriment of society as a whole."

The measure would add the new terms "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to the definition of "sex" in federal civil rights laws, they said. Such a move would have "wide-reaching impacts" on health care, women and girls' legal protections, charitable services to needful populations, schools, personal privacy, athletics, free speech, religious liberties and potentially parental rights, the prelates said.

The Equality Act was introduced in the House and Senate March 13. It also is known as H.R. 5 and S. 788.

The letter was signed by Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, chairman of the Committee for Religious Liberty; and Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, chairman of the Subcommittee for the Promotion

and Defense of Marriage.

Regarding individuals who identify as LGBT, "each and every person should be treated with dignity and respect," the chairmen said. "Part of that dignity, as Pope Benedict stated, is every person's right to gainful and decent employment free of unjust discrimination. Also included is each person's right to services that address their needs for health and safety."

However, "rather than offering meaningful protections for individuals," the Equality Act "would impose sweeping regulations to the detriment of society as a whole," they explained.

"The act's definitions alone would remove women and girls from protected legal existence," the prelates said. "Furthermore, the act also fails to recognize the difference between the person — who has dignity and is entitled to recognition of it — and the actions of a person, which have ethical and social ramifications."

They added, "Conflating the two will introduce a plethora of further legal complications."

Kurtz, Dewane and Conley outlined several areas they said the bill would have the most impact on if it becomes law, including:

- Regulating "thought, belief and speech." "We treasure the First Amendment freedoms of speech, association, conscience and religious exercise," they said. "The Equality Act puts these at risk by requiring uniform assent to new beliefs about human identity that are contrary to those held by many — believers of diverse faiths and nonbelievers alike."
- "Explicitly" retracting religious freedom. "By exempting itself from the bipartisan Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 — an unprecedented move — the Equality Act represents an explicit departure from one of the founding principles of the United States, the freedom of religion," they said.
- Hindering quality health care. "Those experiencing gender dysphoria or incongruence must be treated with care and compassion and should receive from health care professionals the same quality of services and moral protection from harm that is due to everyone," the bishops said. "The Equality Act, however, would force many health care professionals to perform certain treatments and procedures associated with 'gender transition' against their best medical or ethical judgment with respect to a patient."

- Threatening charitable services. The measure "would force a multitude of charitable services to either violate their principles or shut down," they said in the letter. "With the lack of gender criteria, shelters would be required to house vulnerable, sometimes traumatized, women with biological men." Foster care and adoption agencies also "would be expected to place children with same-sex partners, regardless of some birth mothers' wishes and children's best interests," they added.

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Kurtz, Dewane and Conley also said the measure would endanger privacy since it lacks "firm criteria for 'gender identity' " and could lead to emotional or physical harm against individuals "in highly personal sex-segregated spaces such as restrooms and locker rooms."

They also see the legislation having an impact on people's career choices and livelihoods. They pointed to the case of the Colorado cake maker who was sued because he would not make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple; baker Jack Phillips did not refuse outright service to the couple but would not make a cake for their wedding based on his Christian religious beliefs.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in his favor, affirming his religious freedom to refuse such an order. The court said the state "must not be hostile to religion," the bishops noted, but the Equality Act, they said, "would set up entrepreneurs of faith ... for destructive litigation nationwide" because in serving customers, they would not be allowed to "express messages with which they disagree."

"Given all of these effects, we strongly oppose the Equality Act and respectfully urge you to oppose it as well," the bishops told members of Congress. "We pray that wisdom will inform your deliberations on these matters and we readily stand with you, and are willing to assist you, in developing compassionate and just means to eradicate unjust discrimination and harassment from our country."