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Five U.S. bishops, chairmen of U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' committees or subcommittees, said May 17 they were "gravely disappointed" with the U.S. House of Representatives passage of the Equality Act.

In an 236-173 vote, the House approved the measure, H.R. 5, which would add the new terms "sexual orientation" and "gender identity," as well as "pregnancy ... or a related medical condition," to the definition of "sex" in federal civil rights laws, the bishops noted. It also would expand the types of entities covered under those laws and it exempt itself from the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993.

"Rather than offering meaningful protections for individuals, the Equality Act would impose sweeping new norms that negatively impact the unborn, health care, charitable services, schools, personal privacy, athletics, free speech, religious liberties and parental rights," said the chairmen.

Signing the statement were: Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City, Kansas City, chairman of the Committee on Pro-Life Activities; Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development; Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, chairman of the Committee for Religious Liberty; Bishop Michael Barber of Oakland, California, chairman of the Committee on Catholic Education; and Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska, chairman of the Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of

Marriage.

"Our faith calls us to uphold every individual's dignity and rights against unjust discrimination – including in employment, housing and services – regardless of characteristics or background," the bishops said.

"Rather than offering meaningful protections for individuals, the Equality Act would impose sweeping new norms that negatively impact the unborn, health care, charitable services, schools, personal privacy, athletics, free speech, religious liberties and parental rights," they continued.

H.R. 5 contains "unsound definitions of 'sex' and 'gender identity' (that) would erase women's distinct, hard-won recognition in federal laws," the bishops said. "Its sex-based nondiscrimination terms would end women's shelters and many single-sex schools. It would close faith-based foster care and adoption agencies that honor children's rights to a mother and father."

The five prelates added that the bill "would even act as an abortion mandate."

"We must pursue justice and equality for anyone denied it; but this is a regrettable approach," they said. "We are gravely disappointed with the act's passage in the U.S. House."

Earlier in May, Kurtz, Dewane, Barber and Conley were part of a group of a dozen Christian leaders who signed on to a letter to House members voicing religious freedom concerns with the Equality Act.

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In the letter, the signers said they have "grave concern over the devastating consequences to religious freedom" should the bill pass in its current form.

The Equality Act "would devastate the core ministries of a wide range of religious groups, especially those ministries that serve the most vulnerable and that help form members of our faiths to serve the common good," they said.

"These religious freedom concerns are not hypothetical or academic. The Equality Act undercuts the religious freedom of millions of Americans who live out their faith

by serving others through religiously motivated charitable ministries and organizations."

The letter cited several potential ill effects:

– "Houses of worship and other religious spaces will be turned into places of 'public accommodation.'"

– "Federal funds will be denied to thousands of houses of worship, schools, and charities that currently receive them."

– "Religious adoption and foster care providers would be devastated, harming innocent children and families."

– "Many privately funded shelters for the homeless and victims of domestic violence would be rendered illegal, ripping a hole in the social safety net."

– "Core rights would be stripped from religious colleges and universities."

– "Houses of worship, religious charities, and religious individuals will lose the protection of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act."

– "Religious individuals would be forced to take part in weddings and funerals that violate their religious beliefs."

Kurtz, Dewane and Conley, on March 20, sent their own letter to members of Congress on the Equality Act, contending the bill would "regulate thought, belief and speech," "explicitly retract religious freedom" granted by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, "hinder quality health care," "endanger privacy," "threaten charitable services" and "exclude people from various career paths and livelihoods."

"The Equality Act would impose sweeping regulations to the detriment of society as a whole" and its "definitions alone would remove women and girls from protected legal existence," the three bishops said in March. "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. Conflating the two will introduce a plethora of further legal complications," they said.