**Aquinas** **– Rational Conscience**

Aquinas held **reason** in the highest esteem. He said *"Reason in man is rather like God in the world."* Most famously, Aquinas claimed:

*To disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to condemning the command of God.*

Augustine had used the term **'synderesis'** to mean an innate knowledge of right and wrong. He held that this was faulty, due to the fall, and that Christians should look to the authority of the Church and Scripture. Aquinas disagreed, holding that conscience has binding force. Aquinas identifies synderesis with recto ratio or ‘right reason’. It is not a command but an intellectual process.

Aquinas thought that practical reason, through reflection on human nature, can determine primary moral principles (which he called the 'Primary Precepts'). Our 'conscience' then derives secondary principles ('Secondary Precepts') which are applied. As we practice balancing our needs against the needs of others, we develop Prudence.

**Key terms:**

**synderesis** - an innate knowledge of human nature and primary precepts through practical reason

**conscientia** - deriving secondary precepts, and applying them

**prudence** - the virtue of right-reasoning in moral matters, balancing ours and others' needs

As with Paul, Aquinas said that a person's conscience could err (go wrong), either **'invincibly'**, through no fault of their own, or **'vincibly'** - through our own fault. For example, if I give money to a man who is begging on the streets, I have good intentions, but my actions are actually unhelpful. If I had considered my actions carefully, I would have seen that I wasn't helping him to improve his situation - if anything, my actions would keep him on the streets longer. I erred '**vincibly**', as I would have done differently if I'd thought about it.

Imagine if I'd given the money instead to a homeless charity, who would be able to help this man to find accommodation, help conquering his addictions etc, potentially a much better thing to do. However, I did not know that workers at this charity were abusing the homeless people in their care. Supporting the charity was actually the wrong thing to do, but I couldn't have known this - I erred or got it wrong **'invincibly'** - it wasn't my fault.

A different example - the bombing of Dresden. The British government terror bombed Dresden, killing up to 60,000 innocent people. This is a **vincible** error, as they should have known it was wrong and the consequences were obvious - it was their fault, and they are responsible for what happened.

However, consider a bomb dropped on a weapons factory. Unknown to the British forces, a school was hidden under (or near but on no maps) the factory. It was wrong to bomb the school, but this is **invincible** error, as it wasn't the fault of the British in this scenario - they couldn't have known about the school.

This example also illustrates what Aquinas thought about Conscience. It isn't a 'feeling' in your heart, like the guilt you feel when confronted with a homeless man. It is the process of reasoning, moving from the Primary Precepts (such as 'It is right to protect and preserve the innocent') to secondary precepts (such as 'It is wrong to give money to people who beg on the streets'). It involves step by step, logical considerations based on the knowledge available.