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PETER DONDERS
AS HIS CONTEMPORARIES SAW HIM

Outside his own religious institute and restricted circles in his native Holland and the scene of his work Peter Donders is almost completely unknown. One would have to fear that his beatification will fail to arouse much interest among Catholics. The present reflections on the process of his beatification are offered in the hope that some of his brother Redemptorists will be moved to introduce him in popular and attractive form to a wider public. For one thing, some further public interest should assist the development of the cause. We offer an introduction to the material assembled for the presentation of the cause in Rome¹. As a source for a *Life* it has an advantage in that it is principally verbal testimony offered in the diocesan processes, so that it shows Peter Donders as people saw him and judged him in his own day.

It must be confessed that in the case of Father Donders there is very little material to challenge the scholarly researcher, certainly nothing remotely comparable with the mine of information concerning St. Clement Hofbauer that one finds in the *Monumenta Hofbaueriana*. There is much less to reward the student than say Father Michael Curley found in his fine study of St. John Neumann. In the case of Peter Donders the biographer finds himself compelled to rely much more exclusively on material contained in the *Positio*. The real difficulty has been indicated, unintentionally perhaps, by one of the witnesses in the process at 's-Hertogenbosch. « To describe him as I saw him, he was another Curé of Ars »². That is a fair comparison; and as in the case of St. John Vianney, the course of his life followed a routine that occasioned little comment official or otherwise. After all, simple people are not mentioned in despatches.

On the other hand, the case of Peter Donders has some definite advantages over that of the Curé of Ars. His routine existence was prin-

¹ *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Petri Donders Sacerdotis Professae Congregatione Sanctissimi Redemptoris Positio super Introductione Causae*, published by the Sacred Congregation of Rites, Rome, 1913. It is quoted as *Positio*.

² *Positio*, 43. The witness was Hubert Sassen, a lawyer; *Positio*, 3.

cially the care of lepers, which can scarcely fail to arouse interest, and of a wild jungle region that entailed long and dangerous expeditions among primitive peoples. These are the things the witnesses spoke about together with the qualities of kindness, patience and endurance he showed in his very difficult mission. That is what one finds in the *Positio* and it should provide material enough for a biography with considerable popular appeal. It has been used to excellent effect by Father Kronenburg³. The material he used is available to others.

The volume containing the *Positio* has five sections, each with its own independent pagination. The one that contains the evidence concerning the Servant of God is entitled *Summarium*, and it is the only one that interests us⁴. The *Summarium* is in two parts: the evidence given verbally in the diocesan processes and the documents submitted in the case. A brief description of the two parts may assist us to understand the evidence.

There were two diocesan processes, one at 's-Hertogenbosch in Holland and one at Paramaribo in Surinam. In the beginning of each the witnesses were required to answer a set form of questions identifying themselves and explaining the extent of their acquaintance with the candidate.

The witnesses at 's-Hertogenbosch were the more numerous, seventy-six in number of whom twenty-eight were witnesses to healings. Eleven Redemptorists gave evidence, and the others included a number of elderly clergy and laypeople who had been at school or in the seminary with Peter Donders, and some few officials, religious and others who had known him during periods of service in Surinam. By far the most informative is Father Peter Oomen⁵, who had been Father Donders' provincial and had a brief personal acquaintance with him during a canonical visitation. He prepared his evidence thoroughly beforehand, using the most significant of the documents tabled in the process. He is probably also the most reliable of all the witnesses. From the others one gains for the most part some little detail or an occasional useful or edifying anecdote.

The process in Paramaribo offers a much more interesting spectrum of witnesses. There were fifty-one, of whom thirteen were Redemptorists and the rest included officials of the colonial administration, hospital staff, supervisors of plantations, tradesmen and a number of lepers. Naturally enough, the statements here were generally speaking much more lively and vivid than those of the octogenarians who appeared before the Dutch tribunal. Father Cornelius van Coll is especially deserving of attention⁶. He is described in the *Positio* as vice-provincial of Surinam⁷. Like Father

³ J. B. Kronenburg, *De Eerbiedw. Dienaar Gods Petrus Donders C.S.S.R.*, Tilburg, 1925. English translation by John Carr C.S.S.R., London, 1930.

⁴ Pagination of quotations in this article is from the *Summarium*.

⁵ Peter Oomen was born 7 XI 1835, professed 19 X 1857 and ordained 22 IX 1860. At the time of his giving his evidence he was Procurator General, residing in Rome.

⁶ Cornelius van Coll was born 30 I 1842, professed 17 X 1870 and ordained 10 XII 1871.

⁷ *Positio*, 21.

Oomen he prepared his evidence beforehand from information gathered locally and in Holland. The proces gathered information from a large number of the people for whom and with whom Father Donders worked. They are easily recognisable and always worth attention. A good example is Gijsbert Louis Rusp who was associated with Father Donders as an altar boy, sometimes accompanying him on his journeys, and later as schoolmaster in one of the outlying stations. He must have been regarded as some sort of authority, as he is quoted from time to time by other witnesses.

Part II of the *Summarium* consists of documents submitted in the diocesan processes. Among them the biographer should find some useful material.

In this respect the process at 's-Hertogenbosch had rather more to offer, seventeen documents, some of them quite interesting. Of particular importance are the two *curricula vitae* and the *ratio conscientiae* which Father Donders wrote at the request of his Vicar Apostolic, Most Rev. Henry Schaap⁸. Two documents from the hand of his fellow novice, Father John Romme, one notes on his life compiled in 1874 and the other a letter to the provincial on Father Donders' death, are valuable, coming as they do from a man who knew him both as a secular priest and as a Redemptorist⁹. The biographer will discover further useful material in the panegyric preached by the Vicar Apostolic¹⁰ and in the necrology composed by Father Adrian Bossers¹¹.

The process at Paramaribo did not occasion much further documentation. There is, however, a most interesting extract from the chronicles of the Batavia house written by Father Donders himself¹². It is an excellent description of the Indians of Surinam, showing that the author knew them thoroughly and had made a most careful preparation for his work among them. The passage is important evidence of Father Donders' quite exceptional gifts of observation and sound pastoral judgment.

The sketch of Peter Donders' life that follows is based on the verbal evidence and the documentation presented in the processes and following the order of the questions put to the witnesses. It is an outline that can be given substance and life from the same source.

⁸ Documents VII, VIII and IX; *Positio*, 530-540. A translation of these documents appears below.

⁹ Documents X and XI; *Positio*, 540-547. Father John Romme was born 22 III 1832 and was ordained 17 V 1856. Like Father Donders he was already working as a secular priest on the Surinam mission when the Redemptorists came. Following Father Donders' example, he joined him in the novitiate and was professed with him 24 VI 1867.

¹⁰ Document XV; *Positio*, 555-563.

¹¹ Document XVI; *Positio*, 563-580. There is information about Father Bossers in Maurice de Meulemeester C.S.S.R., *Bibliographie générale des écrivains rédemptoristes*, Louvain, II (1935) 42; III (1939) 262. He was in Surinam from 1867, the year of Father Donders' profession as a Redemptorist.

¹² Document XVIII; *Positio*, 580-585.

Early Years

The certificate of his baptism shows that Peter Donders was baptised on 27th October 1809 in the parish church of St. Denis, 't Goirke, Tilburg¹³. His parents were Arnold Denis Donders and Petronella van den Brekel. That extraordinarily well informed witness, Father Oomen, adds the further detail that he was baptised on the day of his birth¹⁴.

The parents, obviously pious if they brought the child along so promptly for baptism, are described by the same witness as being « poor but upright and religious »¹⁵, a description repeated in almost the same words by the few who speak about the family. The only other child was a younger brother named Martin, whose memories of Peter furnish the evidence of a number of witnesses at 's-Hertogenbosch. When Peter was seven years old his mother died and his father married Johanna Maria van de Pas¹⁶.

His schooling was cut short, probably around about the age of twelve, in order that he might earn something to help support the home. He took up the weaver's trade like his father and kept at it until he entered the Minor Seminary¹⁷. Jane Duzee who gave evidence at 's-Hertogenbosch, mainly of what she had heard from others, offers a charming picture of Peter Donders, the working man.

Not long ago I showed a picture of Peter Donders to Mr. Eugene Verster in Loon-op-Zand. As he looked at it he said: « Oh, I knew him very well. I often used to see him carrying a bundle of firewood and a little corn. Ah! Poor fellow! »¹⁸.

It was clearly a home in which poverty and hard work were inescapable. Peter Donders found relief in an occupation which he evidently found most agreeable, teaching the catechism to the children of his neighbourhood. This is a frequent topic of the evidence offered at both tribunals, all the witnesses saying more or less the same as Jane Meelis at 's-Hertogenbosch.

¹³ Document I, *Positio*, 525.

¹⁴ *Positio*, 50.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *Positio*, 535.

¹⁸ *Positio*, 49.

In his free time he used to teach catechism. When the children were with him, they kept very quiet, listening attentively to what he said; and he often brought some little presents in his pocket to reward them if they were silent and attentive. I used to go to the catechism class of a certain devout lady; and if we became noisy she would say: « One, two, three, silence! That's what Peerke Donders used to say and the children kept quiet for him ». She often used to say that Peerke Donders was a holy little man and the children had great respect for him¹⁹.

In his earlier *curriculum vitae* written in 1874 Father Donders says: « It pleased the good God to give me at an early age, about five or six years, an ardent desire for the priesthood in order to work for the salvation of souls so dear to Him »²⁰. Even allowing for the fact that this is an old man recalling his childish aspirations in the light of a full life's work, one has to credit him with an extraordinary singleness of mind. Not even in his longer *curriculum* did he say a word about his work for the children of Tilburg which had attracted so much favourable attention when he was a young man. He begins to appear as a man whose motivation is clear and simple, out of love of God to give himself for the good of those whom God loves.

There is no doubt that the priesthood was his great preoccupation during his adolescent years. He described his escaping military service in the context of his divine call.

When I was eighteen years of age I had to submit to the ballot for military service, and I drew a very low number. Even here the good God was helping me. How? Since at that time I was not in good health and looked weak, I was put off for a year on the word of my doctor; and by the special providence of God the same thing happened each year until after five years I was exempted from military service²¹.

He goes on to tell how he was encouraged by his parish priest, Rev. W. van de Ven and the curate, Father Vogels. Their good offices gained him admission to the Minor Seminary in Gestel-St. Michel, as a witness relates, recalling also the way the parish priest recommended his protege. « I am sending you this young man to do what you like with him. Here in Tilburg is no place for him »²².

¹⁹ *Positio*, 59.

²⁰ *Positio*, 530.

²¹ *Positio*, 534-535.

²² *Positio*, 60.

The Seminarian

Father Donders himself gives us a short account of his time in the Minor Seminary.

He [van de Ven] arranged for me to be received into the Minor Seminary in Gestel-St. Michel as a servant, because all the young men were in the army on account of the civil disturbance, so that there was a shortage of serving staff in the seminary. In this way, as far as I remember, I was fully occupied as a servant; and then another was taken on and it was possible for me to begin my course. After attending class and spending some time at study I helped the other servants. In this way I completed my schooling in Gestel-St. Michel²³.

Since he was at the time twenty-two years old, as he tells us himself²⁴, it must have been in 1831 that he began in this decidedly eccentric fashion his course towards the priesthood. It was a time of unrest in the Lowlands with Belgium gaining independence from Dutch domination; and in Holland the call to arms gave Peter Donders his opportunity. His peculiar position is made almost painfully clear by the evidence given at 's-Hertogenbosch by Father Louis Verhulst C.S.S.R. who was a fellow student of his in the Minor Seminary.

His place in the chapel was behind the students and professors with the servants and maids. One would be deeply moved to see him coming from there slowly and reverently up the length of the chapel to the communion rails²⁵.

Generally speaking boys of Minor Seminary age are not remarkably prone to be merely edified by companions who are at all out of the ordinary. That is how it was at Gestel-St. Michel, as the same witness testified. The servant status of this odd student, some half a dozen years or so older than his companions, made him an obvious butt. Father Verhulst said of him:

He was often teased by the students and even punched. I was an offender myself. In spite of everything he was meek and patient: I never found in him a trace of annoyance. One day during mealtime they began to drag him along so that he was practically running; but all he said was:

²³ *Positio*, 530.

²⁴ *Positio*, 535.

²⁵ *Positio*, 46. Father Louis Verhulst was born 14 V 1824, professed 17 VII 1848 and ordained 12 VIII 1849.

« Easy! Easy! » Especially when the professors were not present they used to tease him at mealtimes, shouting out: « Come here, Peerke you devil ». He always took it patiently and with a gentle smile ²⁶.

Several fellow students gave similar evidence. One spoke of the names the boys used to call their unfortunate companion: the least offensive of them was « Holy Peerke » and the least elegant « Stinker » ²⁷. Another told how the students used to call him names, punch him and kick him in order, as they said, to find out how holy he was ²⁸.

In spite of all the teasing, some of the young fellows were ready enough to help him through his studies. Father Odenhoven who spoke to the tribunal at Paramaribo about what he had heard from contemporaries of Father Donders has some helpful information.

He was generally among the lowest in the class; and the lack of time for his studies is sufficient explanation. Examinations on the Bible were an exception, as he usually came first or close to the top. The students teased him but were generally fond of him. They supplied him with writing materials, books and so on, and they helped him with his lessons, mathematics, history and the rest ²⁹.

The Norbertine, Francis Anthony van der Meulen, who was a fellow student of his in the Minor Seminary, told of how the memory of Peter Donders continued in Gestel-St. Michel. « Even after he left, the name 'Peerke' was given to students of exceptional piety » ³⁰. Other students spoke similarly of the use of the name, which became in time something of a seminary tradition.

The same Norbertine witness said that Peter Donders was no longer teased when he went on to the Major Seminary at Herlaer in 1837 ³¹. There were many voices to speak in praise of his piety and affability and of the respect and affection he gained among the students. In his *curriculum vitae* Father Donders recalled with gratitude that he had been admitted to his theology course through the generous financial assistance supplied by his old parish priest, van

²⁶ *Positio*, 45.

²⁷ *Positio*, 41.

²⁸ *Positio*, 32.

²⁹ *Positio*, 65. Father Engelbert Odenhoven was born 24 VII 1842, professed 19 X 1863 and ordained 21 XII 1867.

³⁰ *Positio*, 36.

³¹ *Positio*, 38.

de Ven; and one of his professors, van Someren, he called his « special benefactor »³². His good parish priest stood behind him all the way and guaranteed his title of ordination³³.

The rather terse account in the *curriculum vitae* suggests that the President of the Major Seminary, Philip van de Ven, took some interest in him while he was still in Gestel-St. Michel. « Meanwhile [while he was studying the humanities] the President of the Major Seminary had me read the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith; and this reading gave rise to the desire of becoming a missionary when I was a priest in order to work for the conversion of the pagans »³⁴.

One may conjecture that the two van de Vens were trying to provide for his ordination, which would explain what Father Donders goes on to relate in his *curriculum*.

The President of the Major Seminary wanted me to ask the provincial of the Jesuits in Ghent to receive me; but the Jesuit provincial decided that I was not called to that Order, since I was then twenty-six years old; and I left on the very next morning. When I got home the President wanted me to set out again for St. Trond to the Reverend Redemptorist Fathers. This was the same sort of thing: the President spoke to me and I did what he said. I asked the Director for a recommendation, which he gave me. « If they don't accept you », added the President, « there are in St. Trond houses of other Orders where you should apply ». And that is what I did. The Rector of the Redemptorists sent me with another candidate to the provincial at Liège, at that time Very Rev. Father de Held³⁵. There I saw too for the first time Father Bernard³⁶, now deceased, and spoke with him. I was not accepted and out of obedience went on to the Franciscan Fathers in St. Trond, who were also not convinced of my vocation³⁷.

³² *Positio*, 531. Rev. G. van Someren had been assistant priest in Peter Donders' parish.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *Positio* 535.

³⁵ Father Frederick de Held was the zealous and vigorous propagator of the Congregation in Belgium, Holland, England, Ireland and the United States. For information concerning him see Maurice de Meulemeester C.S.S.R., *Bibliographie générale* II, 99; C. Dilgskron C.S.S.R., *Friedrich von Held*, Vienna, 1909; Maurice de Meulemeester C.S.S.R., *Frederic von Held*, Jette, 1911.

³⁶ Father Bernard Hafkenscheid was one of the most renowned of Redemptorist missionaries last century, as well known in the United States as in Europe. There is information concerning him in Maurice de Meulemeester C.S.S.R., *Bibliographie générale*. Of many *Lives* published perhaps the most accessible for English speakers is P. Claessens, *Vie du P. Bernard*, Tournai, 1873. An English translation was published in New York in 1875.

³⁷ *Positio*, 535-536.

With the support of his good benefactors Peter Donders began to study philosophy and theology; and « thanks be to God, these studies were more successful than those in the humanities, Latin and the rest »³⁸.

His teacher and guide, Rev. van Someren, seems to have been the one who did most to guide him towards his missionary career. The *curriculum* goes on:

Since the professors and others knew that I wanted to be a missionary, and at that time everyone was going to North America, G. van Someren told me of the great shortage of priests in our own Dutch colonies and how fair it was to choose a field of our own. He said that if I was not opposed to going to Surinam, then I could speak with the Prefect of the Mission there, G. Grooff, because he was to visit the seminary in a few days' time. That is how it turned out. When I spoke with him, we agreed that I was to come out as soon as possible after finishing my course of theology and being ordained priest. This decision was reached in 1839 in the Major Seminary in Haaren. Two years later by God's grace and mercy I was ordained a priest³⁹.

He received tonsure, Minor Orders and Subdiaconate at the hands of Cardinal Sterckx in Mechlin on 26th April 1840, Diaconate in April of the following year and the Priesthood in July⁴⁰. There followed a delay of a full year before he finally set sail for Surinam on 1st August 1842 »⁴¹.

Early Years in Surinam

Father Donders was a secular priest in Surinam for twenty-four years, a slightly longer period than his time as a Redemptorist. Until 1856 he was engaged in parish duties in Paramaribo, the principal town and the residence of the Prefect Apostolic. What must be regarded as a typical description of his life during those early years of his ministry was given by the witness, John Marius Mehcziz.

³⁸ *Positio*, 536.

³⁹ *Positio*, 536-537. Rev. James Grooff succeeded to the position of Prefect Apostolic of Surinam in 1827 in his own twenty-seventh year. There is a note on him in Kronenburg-Carr, 35. He is described as « remarkable for his extraordinary zeal for souls and his tender affection for the lepers ».

⁴⁰ *Positio*, 54.

⁴¹ *Positio*, 537.

When I was thirteen or fourteen Father Donders, who had already been in the church a long time, used to say Mass at seven o'clock. After a quarter of an hour's thanksgiving he used to take a little coffee. At eight he held school for the children. Part of the time was devoted to teaching Christian doctrine and the rest to reading and writing. [...] At ten the Servant of God went out without a hat to visit the Catholics, even in the streets a long way off, coming home at midday or at one or even two o'clock. Sometimes Most Rev. Scheepers would rebuke him for this. He used to have lunch with the rest of the clergy, and afterwards the Servant of God would go to the church to pray. He never took a siesta. When Most Rev. Scheepers was otherwise engaged, he took the catechism class for the children being prepared for their first Holy Communion. After that he went out again on his visitation. If he did not go out he would sometimes play the organ. At seven he had a class for the adults who were to be baptised, and after that he spent the time from eight to ten with Most Rev. Grooff ⁴².

Some of the witnesses in the Paramaribo process added an anecdote or two which can put a little colour into that routine, which after all is not much different from the sort of thing zealous parish clergy do from day to day. Dorothy Kustner, for example, told of Bishop Scheepers often threatening the children during his catechism class: « I'll send Father Donders to Batavia, because you are wearing Father Donders out. Even in the house we get no rest: the whole day long it's nothing but Father Donders! Father Donders » ⁴³! And Jansje Kustner told of the gentleman, probably a planter, who had had rather too much to drink and kept interrupting Father Donders' sermon because he wanted to preach to the people himself. When somebody called the police, Father Donders came down from the pulpit and took the man into the sacristy to talk with him. The story ends delightfully with the information that the gentleman never drank alcohol again ⁴⁴.

For a brief period Father Donders held the office of Pro-vicar. This was from May 1853 to September 1854 ⁴⁵. This was when Most Rev. Scheepers, who had been Pro-vicar for some years was named Vicar Apostolic and went to Holland for his episcopal consecration. In his own narrative Father Donders makes no mention of his office, his only comment being on how busy the half dozen or so clergy

⁴² *Positio*, 98.

⁴³ *Positio*, 97.

⁴⁴ *Positio*. 96.

⁴⁵ *Positio*, 75.

were during the Vicar's absence in Europe ⁴⁶.

Father van Coll offered the important information that « very soon after his arrival the visitation of the plantations was entrusted to the Servant of God in the year 1843. Since Batavia and Coronie were excluded, only two plantations were visited together with the village of New Amsterdam. In time that number grew to twelve » ⁴⁷. This work, principally among the slaves on the plantations, was most exacting, as Father Oomen was able to describe from his own experience.

The plantations are situated on the banks of the rivers, and to visit them one travels by tent-boat. One can take on board only the things needed for the church ceremonies, a little equipment for the overnight stops, a box of food and a large cooler of the type used by the natives. Four Negro oarsmen and a pilot take the Missionary on his journey. The first voyage of this kind, especially when it is made with a companion in the cool of a moonlit night has something romantic about it and can be quite pleasant. But when one has to do it over and over again and alone, burnt by the sun or drenched by violent storms that make one huddle in the tiny shelter at the back of the boat and even spend a wretched night there, all the poetry goes out of it, leaving just the plain, wearying, exhausting truth. And that was the experience of the Servant of God for years on end, as after his heavy day-to-day work in Paramaribo or in Batavia he would make his monthly or even fortnightly visits to the plantations ⁴⁸.

John Mehciz, the young lad already mentioned, offered to the tribunal his own recollections.

As a boy I often went along with the Servant of God to visit the plantations. In the morning at seven or eight o'clock the Servant of God taught the catechism to the slaves, who according to the size of the plantation could number from thirty to about a hundred. After that he heard confessions, and sometimes he would baptise ten or a dozen people. Then he would say Mass, during which he preached. After a short thanksgiving and a cup of coffee he heard confessions again ⁴⁹.

Father Oomen spoke of Father Donders' horror at the condition of the slaves and his earnest wish to see the practice abolished;

⁴⁶ *Positio*, 538.

⁴⁷ *Positio*, 87.

⁴⁸ *Positio*, 75-76.

⁴⁹ *Positio*, 99.

he described the obstacles put in the way by the planters and their overseers; and how in spite of it all he gave more and more attention to the slaves. « In 1843 he began his expeditions with two plantations, and in 1852 he was visiting twelve with a total of 1145 Catholic slaves »⁵⁰.

In 1856 Father Donders was sent to Batavia, the leper station, the place which those who know him usually associate with his memory. Much of the evidence of the witnesses dwelt at length on horrifying descriptions of the disease, which one would have to admit are the sort of thing that has over the years become familiar and really quite conventional. To say that does not in any degree lessen the extraordinary devotion he showed in his work among the lepers over a period of thirty years or so, both as a secular priest and as a Redemptorist. For the greater part of this long period there was little variation in his life of tending the material and spiritual needs of the sick. But he did everything in his own way, and this is the sort of thing that was recalled by many of the witnesses with evident affection in terms similar to the testimony offered by Laurence Doel.

Father Donders was always with us in Batavia. He helped the lepers in all sorts of ways. He fetched water, tended their sores, swept out their houses and served them in other similar ways. He did things like these especially when there was a shortage of staff to look after the sick; and it was mainly due to his efforts that the government eventually provided nurses⁵¹.

Francine Buthil gave similar evidence. « The people of Batavia loved Father Donders, not only because of the many kindnesses he showed us, such as bandaging our feet, carrying water and things like that, but because he helped us by his prayers and teaching »⁵². Accounts like this could be multiplied almost endlessly.

Father van Coll described the patients in Batavia as being almost all very poor and of many races, the Catholics among them numbering about four hundred⁵³. Another witness who knew Father Donders in Batavia gave a picturesque example of his pastoral care.

⁵⁰ *Positio*, 77-78.

⁵¹ *Positio*, 103.

⁵² *Positio*, 93.

⁵³ *Positio*, 88.

One day a ship came to Batavia with sixty lepers, Catholics, Moravian Brethren and pagans, all of them to be placed in the hospice. Father Donders, however, took care to have the Catholics, about ten I think, lodged with the Catholics of Batavia. The assistant minister was unwilling to look after the Moravian Brethren and left them to Father Donders' care. He spent a whole day teaching them, and since they were all very ill, he baptised them⁵⁴.

While he was in Batavia he often had occasion to give clothes to people he found going about practically naked. And there were frequent incidents of the type narrated by Philip Frederick.

One day the Servant of God came to the part where my parents lived. Father Donders knocked at the door of one of the houses where there was a woman who had come in sick from one of the plantations. When Father knocked she asked him not to come in as she had no clothes. He went behind the house and came back after a short time. Then I saw him handing something in through the partially opened door. The woman later told my mother that Father Donders had given her a shirt⁵⁵.

This was by no means the only time he gave the shirt off his back. And he went to all sorts of lengths to get money for the poor: he had given his superiors trouble since the days he had been in Paramaribo. One day Bishop Scheepers in exasperation said to him: « All I do is give, give! What are you going to do when I am dead? » And the culprit answered: « God will still be alive »⁵⁶.

He was apparently still quite a bother to those over him after he became a Redemptorist. One day he was overheard saying to a poor old soul: « Look, dear, I'm poor myself just now and can't give you anything. Just give me time to talk to my confrere who looks after the money and then come back and ask me »⁵⁷.

The Redemptorist

His becoming a Redemptorist is probably best left to himself to narrate, as he put it in his second *curriculum vitae*.

It pleased the good God that the Rev. Father Meurkens, appointed Pro-vicar in 1863 on the death of Bishop Scheepers, should go to Europe

⁵⁴ *Positio*, 248.

⁵⁵ *Positio*. 242.

⁵⁶ *Positio*, 232.

⁵⁷ *Positio*, 225.

on account of his health; and the Mission of Surinam was entrusted to the Reverend Redemptorist Fathers. In 1866 Bishop J.B. Swinkels⁵⁸, Vicar Apostolic, arrived in Paramaribo with two Fathers and a Brother. It was the wish of Propaganda and of His Holiness Pius IX that we secular priests should not leave the Mission, but should stay on. I took the first opportunity to go from Batavia to the city to ask the Bishop to receive me into the Congregation. For a long time, especially after having read the life of our Holy Father written by Father Bossers⁵⁹, I had wanted to become a Redemptorist if it should please the good God to give me a vocation. I prayed to the good God and to the Blessed Virgin Mary in order to discover the holy Will of God. And the good God heard my prayers. I was received by the Rector Major in spite of my fifty-seven years⁶⁰.

Bishop Swinkels, writing to the Dutch provincial, reported that Brother Donders together with Brother J. Romme were to begin their novitiate on the feast of All Saints, November 1st 1866⁶¹. It seems that the Vicar Apostolic himself was the novice master for the eight months or so that the novitiate lasted. His report of his novice sent off to his provincial on the 19th February 1867 describes Father Donders. « He has a very lively character, quite imper- turbable and most agreeable in company with his confreres. The only thing I would like to see is that he were much younger »⁶².

His fellow novice, Father John Romme, after Father Donders' death wrote of him to Father Oomen: « I freely declare that he was always and in everything a source of edification to me. I also gratefully recall that after the good God I owe my vocation to the Congregation mainly to him. Four or five months after Bishop Swinkels' arrival I heard that he had been received and I began to think seriously about it myself »⁶³.

Bishop Swinkels left a more vivid description of his novice which is preserved in a note made in 1875 by his successor, Bishop Schaap⁶⁴.

⁵⁸ John Baptist Swinkels had been the first provincial of the Dutch province in 1855, an office he held until 1865, the year of his appointment as Vicar Apostolic of Surinam. The coming of the Redemptorists was an evident advantage, as the records show for the year 1867, when there were in the Vicariate besides the Bishop four priests and three Brothers besides the two priest novices.

⁵⁹ A. Bossers C.S.S.R., *Leven van den H. Alphonsus de Liguori*, Amsterdam, 1855.

⁶⁰ *Positio*, 538-539.

⁶¹ *Positio*, 527.

⁶² *Positio*, 528.

⁶³ *Positio*, 543-544.

⁶⁴ Henry Schaap was born 27 IX 1823, professed 24 V 1845 and ordained 13 VIII 1850.

His health is sound and his constitution remarkably tough, proved by all sorts of holy excesses. In outward appearance he is like the Curé of Ars. He is a man of short stature, thin, white haired, without teeth and a little stooped. He is young in heart. He is hard working, ready for any task, cheerful in the community, in conduct indistinguishable from all the rest. He has the spirit of our Congregation in its fulness. His memory is good, and his judgement sound and enlightened. He knows enough of the profane sciences as is of advantage to the Negroes and Indians⁶⁵.

He was professed on 24th June 1867⁶⁶ and sent back at once to Batavia, now with another Father as companion and superior⁶⁷. For a man who had lived a solitary life for twenty-four years the religious community must have occasioned some strain; but no indication of anything of the kind appears in the evidence.

One of those who knew him in the Minor Seminary said that Peter Donders had never been looked on as in any way singular, in spite of his austere and prayerful life⁶⁸. And Father Oomen was able to quote Father Donder's own testimony to his appreciation of the companionship he found among the Redemptorists. « After twenty-six years in the leper station the Bishop was so good as to give me the chance of enjoying the company of confreres, a thing I had not known for so many years »⁶⁹.

Father van Coll related that in 1883 Bishop Schaap transferred him for a time from Batavia « on account of his desire for the community life »⁷⁰. That is the way his three years' absence from Batavia seems to have been understood, as one finds similar expressions used by other witnesses. No doubt the transfer of the old man of seventy-four to the city was an act of kindness, but the circumstances made it something of a humiliation, as several witnesses reported. For example, Father de Kuijper C.S.S.R. gave the following account.

I have heard that one of Father Donders' boatmen, resenting his reprimands, reported to the Bishop that he preached badly, not loud enough to be heard. The Bishop then removed him from Batavia, and the rest of the people took his departure badly⁷¹.

⁶⁵ *Positio*, 529.

⁶⁶ *Positio*, 527.

⁶⁷ *Positio*, 107.

⁶⁸ *Positio*, 35.

⁶⁹ *Positio*, 219.

⁷⁰ *Positio*, 136.

⁷¹ *Positio*, 246.

Another witness added that in his last sermon in Batavia Father Donders said to the people: « We are all under the Bishop's authority and must obey. However, even though the Bishop is taking me away from here, I promise you in God's name that I shall die among you. In the day of resurrection I shall be among the lepers to face God's judgement»⁷².

Work for the Indians and Negroes

As early as 1846 Father Donders had written to his old benefactor, van Someren, of his wish to work among the wild peoples of the bush⁷³. Lack of numbers, however, did not make it possible until the coming of the Redemptorists. Shortly after his profession, with now a second man in Batavia, he once more took up the project. He suggested to Bishop Swinkels that he be allowed to visit these peoples in their encampments and instruct them. « The Bishop not only agreed », he gleefully reported, « but even encouraged me ».

The Indians were the original native population, nomad peoples living in the steamy network of rivers that made up Surinam. There were three different races among them, Arrowaks, Warros and Caribs. In the chronicles of the Batavia house there is a concise and most informative account of the Indians and of the mission among them written in Father Donders' own hand: it is appended to this article as one of the very few documents that remain to illustrate the character and pastoral skill of its author.

He was able to commence his long desired work among the Indians in 1868, as Father van Coll reported.

Father Donders went to Kaashoop near the river Saramacca, where between twenty-five and thirty Arrowaks were working. On 9th May 1868 he baptised the first Indians there and put up a hut to serve as a chapel. The Servant of God blessed it on 30th August 1870 in honour of St. Alphon-sus. [...] These Indians were industrious and well behaved, but afterwards they went on to another place⁷⁴.

The account continued, like many of the other statements on this topic, with stories of long and arduous journeys to visit the scat-

⁷² *Positio*, 349.

⁷³ *Positio*, 107.

⁷⁴ *Positio*, 132.

tered encampments of the nomads. For the most part, it was possible to work for only small numbers at a time. Father van Coll said that this work went on with little interruption up to Peter Donders's death⁷⁵. He experienced many a disappointment, especially with the Caribs, who were notorious drunkards. Father Oomen quoted Brother Alphonsus who accompanied Father Donders on a visit to the Indians in 1870. Arriving at one encampment after two days in the boat, they found everybody drunk, « men, women and children ».

After going about the camp for two hours exhorting and beseeching these people to attend to their duties, the Reverend Father in the end had to say his Mass with only three present, myself and two bush Negroes. And even they did not know what they were doing. One of them called out « Hello » when the Father went to the altar, and the other wanted to light his pipe from the altar candle⁷⁶.

He had to put up with a very great deal of frustration of this kind. And there was also danger enough to alarm the boatmen who were his usual companions. He himself seems to have been quite impervious to fear, as is clear from an incident told by many of the witnesses in Pamaribo. Father Bazelmans C.S.S.R. told it this way.

I heard from Rups that when he was schoolmaster in an Indian encampment one of the women was in danger of dying in childbirth. Father Donders came on the scene and gave Rups a razor to hone so that he could do a caesarean section if necessary. Rups said: « Don't do that, Father, or the Indians will be sure to kill you ». The Servant of God replied: « That doesn't matter provided I can baptise the baby ». Rups saw Father Donders praying in the boat with his arms outstretched. Shortly afterwards the woman gave birth; the child was baptised; and the woman is still alive⁷⁷.

Together with the Indians Father Donders mentioned the bush Negroes when he wrote to his provincial. These were runaway slaves who had found refuge in the jungle. Naturally they were suspicious and frequently quite dangerous, as the following incident shows. It was related by a woman of Batavia, Amarantha Tijdig.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Positio*, 314.

⁷⁷ *Positio*, 174. Francis Xavier Bazelmans was born 10 I 1866, professed 29 IX 1890 and ordained 7 X 1896.

I heard from Father Donders' boatmen that one day he went into the bush at Kraaishoop to pray, and a Negro who had been a long time on the run came on him. He attacked Father Donders, shouting: « I'm going to kill you! » The Father said: « Just wait a little, will you, while I finish my prayers ». The Negro let him go then, and he went back to the boatmen. I myself later saw the marks the Negro had left on the Father's neck ⁷⁸.

The Negroes had been in Father Donders' mind as long as the Indians. After he had tasted that early gratifying success among the Arrowaks, he began to consider what he could do for the Negroes. In 1871 he wrote to his provincial:

During what we call here the dry season of the year I was to have gone to the bush Negroes to try and convert them to the holy Faith, but circumstances and my superiors did not permit me; or rather it was not God's Will that I go now ⁷⁹.

He was often frustrated in his wish to go in search of the Negroes; and it was usually on his visits to the Indians that he was able to do some little service for them, as we may gather from the incident of the man who tried to light his pipe from the Mass candle. It was a great joy for him when he could report to Father Oomen, then his provincial, in 1886 « that some Negroes had been settled close to Batavia, and their numbers had grown from about thirty to close on three thousand » ⁸⁰.

By then he was close to the end of his life, and his last word on them was of his hopes for this settlement right under his own eyes. « With the bush Negroes everything is not going as I would like, but we must have patience and trust in God, Who is rich in mercy and omnipotence » ⁸¹.

It seems that after his death rumour busied itself a little with Father Donders' reputation. One story that got about alleged that Bishop Schaap had occasion to take away the good Father's faculties. The affair, which after all had very little substance in it, was mentioned only in the evidence given by Father van Coll. As vice-provincial he was in a particularly good position to know the facts, and he investigated them thoroughly, answering the implied objection and

⁷⁸ *Positio*, 309.

⁷⁹ *Positio*, 119.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*

explaining what really had happened. His treatment of the incident provides an excellent illustration of the pastoral attitudes and practice of Father Donders.

I have heard rumours lately of something I had never heard of before, that Bishop Schaap once took away the Servant of God's faculties. If this were true it would be an argument against his prudence, since his faith and morals were beyond question. In answer to the charge, one must reply:

1^o. - At the age of seventy-four the Servant of God had worked as a missionary in the colony for about forty-one years, winning praise from everyone, serving under four Bishops and even having himself filled a distinguished term as Pro-vicar. He held faculties *usque ad revocationem*, and it is beyond doubt that a canonical reason would have been needed to have deprived him. No one has ever heard of one.

2^o. - Everyone who was in the city at that time, and there are some of them still alive, saw the Servant of God exercising faculties under the Bishop's eye. And if he was without faculties when he was sent away from the city, what apostolic ministry could he have performed?

3^o. - If his faculties had been restricted in one or other point, I would have had to know it, since I had been appointed by Bishop Schaap to act in everything as his vicar when he was absent. I not only conferred the ordinary faculties of the Apostolic See, but I acted in the name of the Bishop when he was away. Some men had only limited faculties; and if there had been any truth in the rumour, then Bishop Schaap would have told me; and the Servant of God, whom I always found as simple and straightforward as a child towards me in spite of his long years in the service of God and of souls, would himself have told me or would at least have referred a case to me. But nothing like this happened. What, then, occasioned the talk?

Right from the beginning of his missionary work the Servant of God used to marry slaves without informing the government. The same happened with the lepers in Batavia, and with connivance. That is the way things were until the emancipation of the slaves; and even now it is allowed with the connivance of the government for the Indians and bush Negroes. But Bishop Schaap did not dare to allow the Servant of God go on performing marriages in his old ways in the city and under the eye of the government.

On the other hand, if the Servant of God came across a case in which a secret marriage would put an end to sin without offending the government, it would cause him more pain than I can say not to use the opportunity⁸².

⁸² *Positio*, 278-280. Though Father van Coll did not say as much, it seems

Death

Father Donders was stationed briefly at Paramaribo after he left his lepers in 1883, and from there he went to the mission of Coronie, where he remained until late in 1885, when as he had promised, he came back to Batavia. He was now seventy-seven years old, and it was soon plain that his old programme was beyond him. A man who had been medical assistant among the lepers related:

When in December 1886 Father Donders came back to Batavia from his last sacred expedition, he was already a little ill, but he would not hear of medicines. During the night of 31st December the illness became serious⁸³.

According to the necrology written by Father Bossers, the trouble was in the kidneys, and it gradually became worse, making it clear to everyone that the end had come.

During the night of 5th-6th January he himself asked for the Holy Sacraments, and Father John⁸⁴ at once did as he asked. On this occasion he made two requests of his confrere, first in his name to ask the pardon of the people if he had offended them in any way, and secondly to tell them how sad he was at the sinful lives of many of them in spite of his repeated pleading. Rev. Father John fulfilled this charge with great emotion during the Mass of the Epiphany. Apart from that occasion Father Donders spoke very little during the illness, never complaining, always satisfied with whatever was given him. In this way, fully resigned to God's Will and with his thoughts filled with his Jesus and the things of heaven, he continued to suffer without losing consciousness until 3.30 in the afternoon of Friday, 14th January 1887. In that moment the good, zealous, devout and exemplary old man gave up his soul into the hands of his heavenly Father⁸⁵.

In the end it seems to be useful to return to the comparison with the Curé of Ars, which appears from time to time in the *Positio*. The two men are alike in so many ways: the poverty of their home life, their lack of schooling, their extraordinary resolution in win-

clear that the rumour was in some way associated with Father Donders' transfer from Batavia in 1883.

⁸³ *Positio*, 446.

⁸⁴ Father John Bakker was born 25 III 1833 and professed as a Brother 15 XI 1860. He was in Surinam as a Brother from 1867, and after being ordained 26 VIII 1883 he returned there. Those who mention him call him Father John.

⁸⁵ *Positio*, 572.

ning through to the priesthood and their entire dedication to routine pastoral duties. The main difference seems to be in the type of ministry each performed; and there the comparison rather seems to favour Peter Donders. If such a comparison is justified, and it does seem to be, then what one ought to discover in the life of Blessed Peter Donders is a Saint John Vianney among the lepers, the Indians and the runaway slaves. And there is no lack of detail in the *Positio* to add colour and form to that portrait.

DOCUMENTS

The foregoing sketch of Peter Donders' life has been expressed in the words of those who gave evidence in the two diocesan processes. Though it has some merit in that it shows the man as he appeared to his contemporaries, it remains no more than a framework, a fleshless skeleton. To help clothe the bare bones we add some of the documentation offered to the tribunals.

The documents we cite were composed for various purposes. They are the work of men who lived with Father Donders in Surinam, so that their value lies in the more comprehensive view of the man that these personal friends of his present. The final document is one of the rare pieces we have from Father Donders' own hand. They have been translated from Latin into English in the hope of their being more widely read and used.

I

Notes concerning Rev. Father Donders
by Rev. Father J. Romme C.S.S.R.¹

J.M.J.A.

Paramaribo 1st October 1874

I am not very familiar with Father Donders' life in Europe. It is well known that when he was in the Seminary everyone considered him holy. Even now in the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch, espe-

¹ Document X of the *Summarium*. This short appreciation of Father Donders by his novitiate companion was very likely written at the request of Bishop Schaap. In the same year, 1874, the Bishop had Father Donders prepare for him a short *curriculum vitae*. One may reasonably conjecture that the Bishop already had in view a future beatification process.

cially among the older priests he is commonly called « holy Peerke ». From the time of his coming to the colony of Surinam on 17th September 1842 up to the present his life has continued to be holy and edifying. Soon after his arrival Bishop Grooff wrote in a letter to Holland, to Bishop Wijckerslooth², I think, that he was most satisfied with Rev. Donders; and begging for further missionaries, the Bishop hoped that they would be filled with the spirit of Rev. Donders.

For more than ten years it has been my good fortune to know Rev. Donders, as a secular priest for two years and for about eight as a member of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer; he has always edified everyone and won their praise by a life that is holy, simple and most of all kindly. I say « everyone » with some emphasis, and by that I mean not only the secular clergy among whom he used to live, nor just the present Redemptorists, nor even just the nuns, who hold him in the greatest veneration and honour, but I mean everyone who has ever known him or has ever met him. The people on the plantations are always asking me most earnestly about him, even the careless Catholics and especially Protestants and Jews. I have often heard even the Jews calling him a saint: « Yes, Father Donders really is a holy man: if he doesn't get to heaven, which of us ever will? » That sort of thing.

And what is the reason for this praise, spoken almost spontaneously by non-catholics who have very little personal interest in the things of God? It is due to his exceptional and heroic virtue, his tireless zeal for the salvation of souls. His zeal knows no limits other than those imposed by obedience. When he arrives home exhausted by a journey around the plantations or an expedition to the Indians, you can do him no greater service than let him take the children for catechism, give an instruction to the Holy Family³ or preach a sermon. When he is in Batavia he has an instruction on Christian doctrine every evening, and he usually does all the preaching.

His zeal is unflagging in visiting and instructing the people on the plantations, even though in some places he gets little return

² Bishop van Wijckerslooth, titular Bishop of Curium, residing at Duinzicht, was procurator of the Surinam mission. He had ordained Peter Donders deacon in his private oratory on 10th April 1841 and priest on 5th June of the same year.

³ The Archconfraternity of the Holy Family was founded in Liège for the benefit of working men. From the beginning, principally through the interest of Father Victor Dechamps, later Cardinal and Archbishop of Malines, it was warmly supported by the Redemptorists. Particularly during the nineteenth century it was very widely propagated. Cf. John F. Byrne C.S.S.R., *The Redemptorist Centenaries, Philadelphia, 1932, 244-249.*

for his efforts. It is the same with the Indians. With them his zeal appears in an heroic degree. He saves the wine and beer he takes with him for his own use and drinks only water from the rivers and creeks, which is usually quite smelly and even unhealthy if one is not used to it. Why does he not use the wine and beer? It is in order to give it to the Indians and so win them for God.

Who are the Indians he visits? First, there are the Caribs on the Tibiti, the Wayombo and the other rivers. They are given to strong drink and are so irreligious that they can be brought together only with the greatest difficulty, and then after listening no more than a few minutes, they go off one after the other. In spite of all the difficulties, which would try the patience of Job, by God's grace he has reached the point where he has been able to baptise, not only the children, but even adults. In fact, I think he has been able to baptise almost all the adults and join them in Christian marriages.

Then there are the Arrowak Indians. They are the most receptive of religion, but one has to go a long way to reach them. Some of them live by the Maratakka creek, a branch of the river Nickerie. It is some eighty hours' travel from Batavia, which requires a journey of eight days under a burning sun and with no other shelter at night than the tent on the boat.

Others live on the Upper Saramacca, some a short distance from the river; but to reach others requires travelling for six hours on foot through dense jungle. Not realising that there was another way by the Surinam river and Parakreek, he set off once about mid-day through the jungle and swamps, accompanied by Joseph, his head boatman who usually goes with him and is a great help to him, and an Indian guide. They came on several streams, which they bridged by trunks of trees or logs, so that the way was extremely dangerous for one who was not used to it. They arrived quite worn out, spent the night in an Indian hut and came back the same way the following day. Father Donders certainly would have gone back there, even though Joseph said he would not face that dangerous journey with him again. The Bishop, however, forbade him and told another Father to visit the Indians by way of the Surinam river and Parakreek.

Everybody knows of his humility, meekness, love of mortification, love of prayer, charity towards others and so on, his patience with the boatmen when they are ill.

II

Letter of Rev. Fr. J. Romme C.S.S.R.
to Very Rev. Fr. P. Oomen C.S.S.R., Provincial.⁴

J.M.J.A.

Batavia, 18th April 1887.

Your Reverence asked me to write down for you what I remember of the edifying life of my holy predecessor, Father Donders. It is not easy to write much about him that is new, since Father van Coll has already published in his fine article in the *Volksmissionaris*⁵ the things that were best known; and you yourself know that the humble Father always kept his virtue and good deeds as secret as he could.

What I sent to the archivist in Paramaribo shortly after his death may possibly be known to you, either in part or in whole. It dealt mainly with his love of prayer, for the salvation of souls and of mortification.

During the twenty-three years I knew him on the Surinam mission only twice were we together in the same house. The first time was for about a year during our novitiate in Paramaribo. There is information about that in the chronicles of the time. For my own part, I gladly admit that he always edified me, and that I always gratefully remember that, after the good God, I owe my vocation to the Congregation mostly to his example. About four or five months after the arrival of Bishop Swinkels I heard that Father had been accepted, and then I began to think seriously about it myself. As far as I recall I had never for a moment thought of it before that.

The second time was when we worked together for two years in Coronie, from November 1883 to November 1885. I shall speak in more detail of these two years as far as I remember them.

From the start he showed himself to be a man of God, all on fire for the salvation of souls. No obstacle was too great, no sacrifice too heavy: rather the harder the work, the better he liked it.

⁴ Document XI of the *Summarium*. This reply to the provincial's request for information proved an important source of the evidence Father Oomen gave in the process at 's-Hertogenbosch. Father Romme, a careful witness, preferred to keep to what he had seen for himself when Father Donders was with him in Coronie.

⁵ C. van Coll, *Pater Donders* in *De Volksmissionaris* 8 (1887) 147-165. The periodical was a pastoral publication of the Dutch Redemptorists. The article was also used by Father Oomen in his evidence.

I remember that shortly after he arrived I had to go to Welgelegen on foot, because the horse was not available. It was two hours away under a tropical sun and in the dry season; and Father Donders had never been there.

At midday I said to him with a laugh: « Well, Father, are you coming to Welgelegen with me? ».

« Oh, yes », he answered.

« But do you know that it is a good two hours' walk, and we have to go there and back? ».

His only reply was: « Are you going? Then I must do the same. I can do it too ». And he did the trip easily. He was then seventy-four years old.

In spite of his tough constitution, in those early days he suffered two severe illnesses. The first was a fever which began on 26th December. Very likely it was partly due to the sea air, but also to his indulging too much his love of mortification during Advent. Whatever the cause, the fever lasted, becoming worse until about ten days after the New Year his feet started to swell badly. Because of the fever he could not sleep at night. We decided to make a novena for his recovery, and at his wish we made it to St. Joseph. His condition was unchanged during the novena, but he had a good night's sleep after it ended. The fever left him, and after a few days he was able to take up his duties.

This did not last long, because about the middle of February he had more trouble, a large swelling or an ulcer on his left knee, which for more than two weeks kept him from saying Mass; and since it was slow to heal, for a longer time still he could not go out. But he never gave a sign of complaint, either when the surgeon was treating him or during his long convalescence, so that we often said to each other: « This is strange. We know how much he wants to get back to work and visit the poor and the sick, and yet he never says a word about it ». It was always: « As the good God wishes ».

He no sooner felt himself strong enough than he was out of the house twice a day, going about the neighbourhood, not for the sake of exercise — he never thought that way — but in order to do a little good. I often had to urge him to be careful.

Then the following Lent, and indeed all fast days, became a time of sacrifice for Father, since he had to restrain his love of mortification: the Bishop had forbidden him to fast because of his age and his recent illness. When he thought he was strong enough, he begged me again and again to try and get the order withdrawn; and when I thought it best not to, he submitted without delay, but not

so as to indulge the pleasures of the senses. He would take a scrap of bread as small and as thin as possible.

In July Bishop Schaap came to Coronie for confirmation; and what was the first, perhaps the only favour Father asked? Permission to spend the night on the bare ground. He used this permission right from the first night. It so happened that the Brother saw him when he had occasion to go to his room in the evening to fetch something. As far as I know, he always spent the nights like this up to his last illness.

You already know that he used to get up every night to spend a long time before the Blessed Sacrament, and that he took the discipline practically every evening and often of a morning as well, frequently scourging himself to blood. I sent his discipline to the Bishop: it had sharp points and nails attached to it and was all stained with blood.

Coronie, as you know, is simply alive with mosquitoes, and they often make meditation time almost unendurable, especially in the morning and evening, when they plague everyone; and yet we have hardly ever seen Father trying to chase them away. If we should walk up and down so as to be less troubled, then Father would follow our example so as not to seem different.

As you know too, at Coronie we have two succursal churches, each about two hours' walk from our house and church at Marishope, one to the east and the other to the west. We used to visit them in turn. Father never missed his turn if it was at all possible; and it was humanly speaking very hard for him when two or three months of the year he could not get to the church of Welgelegen. Part of the road was subject to flooding and we could travel only on horseback and not in the buggy. He would very much have liked to ride there, but he decided rightly that it would not be prudent at his age to try to learn on a somewhat restive horse. Just the same, whenever I came back, his first question was always what was the road like, and he would even often go out himself to have a look at it.

In Burnside at that time we used to have lunch with the manager. He preferred it when the manager was away; but when he was at home, he would get away as soon as he could after lunch to busy himself in the houses of the Negroes with the religious needs of the people.

On the way to and from the succursal churches he always said the Rosary with his driver, together with prayers for sinners, for the dead and so on. When the two of us went together in the buggy, he was always happy if I suggested after the Rosary a little

time of private prayer. Whenever the clock struck, his lips would move: very likely he said the *Ave Maria*.

A word now about the fruit of his zeal. It was not always given him to see his efforts get quick results, but he never lost heart. Once he heard that a European who never went to the church and had been living in concubinage for twenty years had declared that he would make his confession to nobody but Father Donders. The day after he got to Coronie he called on the man, who raised all sorts of difficulties at first; but Father kept up his visits until in the end he brought the man to a lawful marriage and to Mass and the Sacraments. This is one case among many.

He was not able to see such a happy outcome every time, but I know of many a case of conversion which occurred after he had gone away and which I could recognise as the result of his zeal.

I could give him no greater pleasure than to point out a few old people who needed to be prepared to receive the Sacraments. He could be seen many times a day teaching them the *Pater*, *Ave* and so on. It is no wonder that everyone thought highly of Father Donders and that many even called him Holy Father Donders.

These jottings, Very Reverend Father, are what I recall of Father's work in Coronie. As a priest and religious he was for our little community and for the faithful an example of every virtue. May God be his reward exceeding great. This is our confident hope. In so far as I can I spend a little time each day at his grave, and I do not forget to say, as you ask, a *Pater* and an *Ave* for your intentions. I am quite sure that by his intercession great blessings will come to Batavia, to the mission of Surinam and to the whole Congregation.

J. Romme C.S.S.R.

III

Panegyric of Father Peter Donders
by Most Rev. H. Schaap C.S.S.R., Vicar Apostolic of Surinam⁶

« Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves ». (Matt. X, 16).

I am sure, my dear people, that we shall never find a man who has better fulfilled that precept of the adorable Saviour of men than the venerable Servant of God, lately taken from us by death. An amiable simplicity accompanied by heaven's gift of prudence, that is the basic quality we find in Father Donders' life. I believe that if I had had the good fortune to be with him when he was dying, I would have ventured to whisper to him: « Dear confrere, will you let me speak to the people after your death about the great things God's fatherly Providence has done for you? » And certainly that good, honest man who sought God and God alone in everything would have agreed. And why not? After his death there would no longer be any danger of offending God by vanity. It is true that in this life it is good to hide the secret things of God; but when we are saved and gone up to God, it is praiseworthy to reveal and confess His works. With my conscience undisturbed and fully convinced that I am in no way offending the holy sensitivity that our deceased brother cherished all his life until his death, I shall speak to you about him.

We shall distinguish four periods in his life: his life in the world, his life as a seminarian, his life as a secular priest and his life in the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. It is my intention to show you how throughout his life there was this wonderful harmony of simplicity and prudence.

I

Father Donders was born at Tilburg 27th October 1809. The family of this admirable priest is yet another proof of the Lord's love of the poor. « Has not God chosen the poor in this world? »

⁶ Document XV of the *Summarium*. Bishop Schaap had collected evidence of Father Donders' sanctity at least from as early as 1874. He is surely to be credited with much of the initiative shown in forwarding the cause.

(Jas. II, 5). « My parents were poor ». That is what he wrote in an account he compiled at my request in 1879. For this reason, after being at school only a short time, he had to learn a trade. « And the trade », he says, « was spinning and weaving ».

You know, my friends, that anyone as simple and therefore as humble as Father Donders was could never understand how a person could be ashamed of his family. He never tried to make a secret of it, except when he had to do with people who make family and wealth the sole norm to judge a man's honesty, skill, knowledge and rectitude. Then the prudent man did not mention his origins, lest he do harm to God's cause. « Be wise as serpents ».

II

Can you understand, my friends, how a young man, placed by Providence in such poverty, could ever dream he would one day be a priest? And yet that is what he had in mind.

« My parents were poor and would never have been able to pay for my studies; but in spite of this from the time I was child I had the desire and even the assurance that one day I would be a priest. The special help of Divine Providence which I constantly experienced, nourished this confidence and rooted it ever more deeply in me. When I was eighteen, I had to submit to the ballot for military service; but though all the rest were enlisted, I was put off for five years on account of my bad health, and in the end I was completely exempted ».

These words reveal both the Christian simplicity of his unwavering confidence and at the same time his wisdom and prudence in what he did to satisfy the desire of his heart.

« I understood », he continues, « that I had to do something for myself, and I wrote to my parish priest asking him to help me begin the study of Latin. The parish priest wrote to the Seminary Director, Rev. Smits; and I was admitted to serve the students, in my free time being allowed to give what attention I could to my own studies. There was no opportunity to study at first, but after half a year another servant was taken on and I was able to go to the classes ».

Through reading the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith he began to think of working on the missions of North America; but his superiors in the Seminary advised him rather to join a religious

institute. First he was sent to the Jesuits at Ghent. Understandably, they did not receive him on account of his age (he was twenty-six) and lack of schooling. Nor was he received by the Redemptorists in St. Trond and Liège, and for the same reasons. They advised him to try once more, this time with the Franciscans. But they thought his health too frail for their hard life, and they were unwilling to hold out hope for him even if his health should improve, before he had completed his philosophy and theology.

He went back, therefore, to the Seminary to devote himself completely to his studies. « These studies », he writes, « made better progress than the humanities ». No wonder! Could such simple obedience fail to win heaven's blessing? That is the way he saw it himself, as I find in what he has written; and I think he shows by that how richly endowed he was with true prudence and wisdom. This soon became evident.

In 1839 the Prefect of the mission in Surinam visited Holland, and he was informed by Very Rev. van Someren, a generous benefactor of our Peter, that he wished to go to this mission. The Prefect was willing to accept him at once, but provided he first finish his theology.

The closer the time came when his heart's dearest wish should be satisfied he tried even harder, if that were possible, in applying himself to his studies. In 1841 he was ordained priest; but since there was no opportunity of making the voyage, he could not leave for Surinam until the following year.

He left the Seminary, leaving behind with everybody, professors and students, the memory of an exemplary young man adorned with all the virtues, especially holy simplicity and prudence. How could he have persevered in the Seminary where he was both student and servant if he had not been both prudent and simple? He seemed to everyone an unattainable ideal of virtue. In later years the greatest praise one could give a good student was to compare him with Peerke Donders. How often I have received money, gifts of venerable priests who were with Father Donders in the Seminary, with the condition that « Father Donders say some Masses for them or at least pray for them ».

III

On 16th or 17th September 1842 he arrived in the city of Paramaribo in Surinam, to remain there until 1856. And what great

deeds of fortitude, sacrifice and charity were performed by the venerable missionary in the simplicity of his heart and guided by God's Wisdom.

Shortly after his arrival, by the adorable design of Divine Providence the entire burden of the mission in the city was placed on his shoulders, since the other two missionaries then in Paramaribo, Rev. Grooff and Rev. Jansen, fell ill with dysentery. The latter died of it in fact, and the other needed a long convalescence and was unable to attend to his duties. Then, just when he had recovered sufficiently to assist his overworked companion, he was recalled to Holland to be consecrated Bishop and to take up the office of Vicar Apostolic of the East Indies.

The parish priest, Rev. Scheepers, came from the coastal district to Paramaribo to share Father Donders' work. Shortly afterwards further help came from Holland.

In 1851 there was an outbreak of yellow fever in the colony. Father Donders went about all the homes where there were sick; and twice a week he went to the hospital, which in those sad days in spite of its size proved far too small. He soon caught the contagious disease himself, and then after four weeks he recovered and took up again his heroic work of mercy, sacrifice and charity.

The older ones among you, my dear friends, will still remember how in those days he was already venerated by everybody, Catholics and non-catholics alike, as a saint for his angelic simplicity and his burning fervour. Even his ecclesiastical superiors showed how highly they regarded his prudence when on Bishop Scheepers' return to Holland and Father Donders' being left in the city with Rev. Meurkens, he was appointed Pro-Vicar.

In 1853 Bishop Scheepers came back to the colony and he kept Father Donders with him in the city for a few years more because of his marvellous zeal for souls. Then in 1856 he sent him to Batavia on the *Coppename*, where for ten long years he worked for the lepers of this station.

IV

Towards the end of 1865 it was announced in Paramaribo that the Holy See had entrusted the mission of Surinam to the Redemptorist Fathers of the Dutch province. For Father Donders this was quite unexpected. Now, heartened by God's Providence, unforeseen and adorable as it was, he ventured to satisfy a wish that

for thirty years had been very close to his heart, to be counted among the sons of St. Alphonsus. As soon as he could he came from Batavia to the city and humbly begged the first Redemptorist Bishop to receive him into the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. Would his request be granted? Must not the Bishop have known that Rev. Donders was already fifty-seven years old? Certainly he was good, fervent, pious, an example of all the virtues; but it is one thing to seek the highest perfection in one's own way but something quite different to do the same in total dependence on another person! And even to bind oneself to this by vow! To bear the yoke of religious obedience, though it is a sure and safe way to salvation, can be very burdensome to a man who takes it up when he is already advanced in years. And then the community life in the monastery requires of those who follow it a certain suitability, such as even holy men do not always receive from heaven.

But after Bishop Swinkels had known Rev. Donders only a few days he did not hesitate to ask the superiors of the Congregation to receive him as a novice. Thanks be to God! We welcomed a saint amongst us. From the first day of his entry he showed himself a perfect religious, perfect in everything.

Never once did his superiors or confreres find in him anything deserving of reproof. From the very first we had to confess, with thanks to Him from Whom all good comes, that in Father Donders we had been given a treasure of religious and priestly virtues. We used to say to each other that in Father Donders we had found our teacher. Here once more he was an unattainable ideal. For us Father Donders was always an object of veneration. If he spent a few days with us before going back to his beloved Batavia, then spontaneously and as though moved by some supernatural power, singly or all together we would kneel to get his blessing.

I cannot nor do I think I should tell you everything about the penances he performed to win from God the conversion of his unhappy flock of lepers and Indians. Possibly, you could not bear to hear it, and you might gently rebuke us, his superiors, for allowing these things. However, do not forget that all those nights spent before the Blessed Sacrament, that daily fast and the continual abstinence from meat, the harsh scourging of his body for years on end did not prevent his being always in good health and reaching the age of seventy-seven. That is our justification.

I wish to say once more that the chief reason for our deep love and veneration for Father Donders was his unflinching practice of the virtues that make community life so pleasant, that make a

religious all things to all men even while his heart never ceases to beat for God and God alone, namely simplicity and prudence. Only those who live in community can really appreciate what I am saying to all of you, and what a tribute I have paid to the man.

After a novitiate of six months, which for a man like Father Donders was rightly considered sufficient, he took his vows into the hands of Bishop Swinkels, and shortly afterwards was sent back to Batavia, where he was to die. For more than twenty-five years all together he worked among those unhappy people. On the day before this last New Year he preached his last sermon.

By New Year's Day this was beyond his strength, which was a great disappointment, the more so for its being a Saturday and the devout servant of Mary had long been accustomed to preaching on Saturday in praise of the Divine Mother. He could not even say Mass.

For two weeks he suffered greatly but spoke little. Simple and prudent even until death, he answered all the questions of the confrere who looked after him and gave him the last Sacraments. « I have nothing to arrange or to settle », he said, « and just this one thing to say. Tell those wretched people to follow my instructions when I am dead better than they did while I was alive ».

I had sent Father de Kuyper⁷ to Batavia with another doctor to help the Father and the doctor already there. When he arrived the Servant of God had been dead just one hour. That was 14th January at half past three in the afternoon.

IV

Necrology of Rev. Father Peter Donders who died piously
at the leper station at Batavia, Surinam on 14th January 1887

By Adrian Bossers C.S.S.R., Chronista and Archivist
of the Mission of Surinam⁸

Father Donders was born on 27th October 1809 at Tilburg in the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch of parents who were Catholic and pious, but poor and humble. His father, a poor working man, was

⁷ Father Alphonsus de Kuyper was born 2 VIII 1850, professed 17 X 1870 and ordained 8 X 1875.

⁸ Document XVI of the *Summarium*. Father Bossers, an assiduous writer, had the advantage of his being on the Surinam mission. He is most meticulous in checking dates and similar details — to the point of sometimes becoming wearisome, one has to admit.

Arnold Denis Donders and his mother Petronella van den Brekel. We learn from a document he wrote on 13th August 1879 that from childhood he was much given to prayer and had a special devotion to the Blessed Mother of the Lord, to whom he owed his twofold vocation, to the priesthood and to the religious state.

At a very early age he had formed the wish to be a priest, impossible as it seemed to be on account of his parents' poverty. In spite of everything, he was unshaken in his confidence that he would one day reach the priesthood, and he set about laying solid foundations of the priestly virtues.

After his childhood, when he had been taught enough in church and in school, he was required to help his family in its poverty by the work of his hands. He became a weaver, a trade he followed until he reached the age of twenty-two in 1831.

When he was eighteen he became subject to the draft for the national militia, and since he drew a low number he should have gone into the army; but he was at the time in poor health and looked quite weak, and so after he was examined by a doctor his service was put off for a year. Each year he appeared before the commission and each year he was put off, until after five years in 1831 he was exempted from military service. Freed of this bond, he wrote at once to his parish priest and confessor, Rev. W. van de Ven, who had been pastor of 't Goirke since 1826. In his letter, written about Pentecost of 1831, in his simplicity he revealed his desire and the reasons that seemed to show that he had a vocation to the priesthood⁹.

The parish priest, seeing no problem other than the need to be allowed to study free of charge and at an advanced age, spoke about his devout parishioner with Rev. H. Smits, the Director of the Minor Seminary in Gestel-St. Michel. They decided he could go to the Seminary and test his vocation to the priesthood, provided he agree to do domestic service in the Seminary, attending classes and studying as far as it was possible. The Director had come to this decision partly on account of the shortage of domestic staff in the Seminary. It had become very difficult to find suitable servants, since at that time the young men were conscripted into the army.

The parish priest soon received this favourable reply; and Providence arranged that the new student should learn of his conditio-

⁹ The incident of the ballot for the draft clearly had assumed extraordinary significance in Father Donders' mind. Father Bossers probably learned from himself that it occasioned his taking the first steps towards the priesthood, as he represents it in the necrology.

nal admission into the Seminary from the curate at 't Goirke, Rev. Aegidius Vogels, later a well known Redemptorist Father¹⁰. Shortly afterwards the humble student set out and, strong in his trust in God's Providence, faced the trial of his virtue. At first he was the only servant, so that he had no opportunity to study or even to go to class.

This state of things lasted more than half a year, until a second servant was taken on. Then he could attend the classes, but in the rest of the time he had to help the other servant in his work. In this fashion he spent four or five years in Gestel-St. Michel. While serving his fellow students and edifying all of them by his humility and piety, he was able to husband his free time so well that in that short space he had made sufficient progress in the preliminary studies. The humanities, however, occasioned him more trouble with less success than his higher studies.

During the five years he was in the Minor Seminary the President of the Major Seminary, Rev. Philip van de Ven, who died on 13th November 1837, got him to read the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith, and this led him to desire, once ordained, to work on the foreign missions for the conversion of the unbelievers.

At the end of 1835 his early studies were judged sufficient, and a decision had to be made about his further course. The exemplary and diligent student was then twenty-six years old. Rev. Philip van de Ven thought that Peter Donders had a vocation to some Order or Congregation of missionaries, and advised him to apply to the Jesuits at Ghent. The President sent him with his own recommendation, but he was told the Society would not accept him. When he returned home the President sent him to Belgium again, to the Redemptorists at St. Trond with the advice that if they rejected him to go to the Franciscans.

After being examined in St. Trond, he was sent to the provincial at Liège. Very Rev. Fr. de Held's practice was to examine aspirants there with Father Bernard Hafkenscheid of Amsterdam. He was found to have insufficient schooling to be admitted to the novitiate.

Out of obedience he next tried to see if he would have better luck with the Franciscans at St. Trond. He was not received by the Friars, but they gave him a letter for the President which, without

¹⁰ Father Aegidius Vogels was born 20 VII 1804 and ordained 1 III 1828. He was professed as a Redemptorist 16 VII 1844.

holding out any hope, suggested that he study philosophy for a year in the Seminary and then come back if he still wanted to be a Franciscan. The President judged that his protege should give up the idea of being a Franciscan, as this was certainly not his vocation. It was decided, then, that he should go on to the Major Seminary to study philosophy and theology, leaving it to God's Providence to choose a task for this fervent disciple of Jesus Christ. In all these troubles, humiliations and trials he drew strength from the thought of God's Holy Will, his obedience to his superiors and his unwavering confidence that he would one day be a priest and a missionary.

At the end of 1835 or the beginning of 1836 he began the study of philosophy, which at that time lasted only one year and from 1829 to 1836 was done in the Minor Seminary at Gestel-St. Michel and not in the Major Seminary at Herlaer. The following year, 1837, he went to the Major Seminary at Herlaer, whether he had finished his philosophy or not, because at the beginning of 1837 the philosophy course was transferred to there, where for seven or eight years there had been only theologians.

In 1837 he began to study theology in the Major Seminary at Herlaer, continuing in the new building at Haaren from July 1839 to July 1842. The successor to Rev. Philip van de Ven after his death on 13th November 1837 at Herlaer was Very Rev. James Cuyten, appointed on 22nd November. He took the students of philosophy and theology on 16th and 17th July 1839 to the new Seminary erected by himself.

In the Minor Seminary he had been known as « holy Peter Donders », and a student who followed his example was called « Peerke ». He was still in Herlaer when Very Rev. J. Grooff, Prefect of the mission of Surinam, came there in 1838 or in the first months of 1839. The Prefect arrived in July 1838 and left from Nieuwediep with Rev. Theodore Kempkes, whom he had recruited, on 20th February 1839, arriving in Surinam at the beginning of April.

While the Prefect of Surinam was in Holland and was expected to visit the Seminary, the philosophy professor, Rev. G. van Someren, who knew as others did that Peter Donders wanted to be a missionary, said to him: « You want to go to North America as a missionary. That is what everybody does these days: I would prefer to see you go to a Dutch colony that also needs priests. I think it only fair that we prefer our own colonies to foreign lands. If you are willing to go to Surinam, you will soon have a fine opportunity to speak with the Prefect of the mission there ».

A few days later the Prefect came to the Seminary and spoke with the theologian who wanted to be a missionary. He found him suitable and accepted him on condition that he continue with his theology, coming out to Surinam only when he had been ordained and finished his studies. The faithful servant of God remained true to this agreement, which was made in 1838 or early in 1839 in the Seminary of Herlaer.

He went on calmly and happily with the study of theology, which was more agreeable to him than philosophy or literature. He never relaxed his austere and pious life, laying deep foundations for the life ahead of him.

In 1840 he received tonsure, the four Minor Orders and the Subdiaconate in Malines. The following year Most Rev. Louis Cornelius Baron van Wijckerslooth, titular Bishop of Curium, ordained him Deacon on the Saturday of Quarter Tense before Easter and on 5th June 1841 ordained him Priest in Duinzicht near Oegstgeest. After his ordination Rev. Donders had to remain more than a year in the Seminary, so that he had an excellent opportunity to prepare for his great venture by still greater efforts at virtue and learning.

Finally, about July 1842 Mgr. van Curium, procurator of the Surinam mission, summoned him to Oegstgeest to prepare for the voyage. During the month before he sailed he served for three weeks as assistant in the parish of Warmond. On 1st August he set out full of joy from Nieuwediep in the ship *Rathuizen*, and after a voyage of forty-six days arrived in Paramaribo on 16th September.

On Sunday 18th September he celebrated a High Mass assisted by Rev. Jansen and Rev. Kempkes, while the Prefect preached. On 8th October the Prefect took him to Batavia, returning to the city on the 20th. There on 31st October he preached his first sermon, his theme being the value of the soul. From this time he gave himself wholeheartedly to his duties in the city and in the plantations. In the beginning he visited the plantations of the Lower Surinam and the Lower Commewyne, but he also went often to the Upper Surinam and the Saramacca. From September 1842 to August 1856 he was based in Paramaribo, from there going to the plantations and occasionally to Batavia.

During the absence of Mgr. Scheepers from May 1853 to September 1854 Rev. Donders was in charge of the mission and with Rev. Meurkens was responsible for all the pastoral work in the city and on the plantations. Though not sturdy in build, he took on all sorts of work and rarely had to interrupt them on account of illness.

In 1851 there was an outbreak of yellow fever. Many sol-

diers and other Europeans died of the disease. Rev. Donders used to visit the sick in the hospital with the greatest zeal and unselfishness; and that is probably why he caught the disease himself and for a month was unable to perform his duties. While he was in Batavia between 1856 and 1866 he suffered from a troublesome rash which he had to have treated by the doctor.

During the twenty-six years from August 1856 that he lived in Batavia he not only looked after the lepers with zeal, humility and kindness, but he used to visit the plantations on the Saramacca, and from July 1864 until March 1866 even Pieterszorg on the Comewyne and Resolutie on the Surinam. It was the shortage of priests that was the reason for Batavia's often being deprived of its pastor for long periods¹¹.

After the Surinam mission was entrusted to our Congregation he was moved by his reading of the life of our Holy Father Alphonsus to ask Bishop Swinkels to receive him into the Institute. On the recommendation of the Vicar Apostolic because of his virtue and apostolic zeal he was admitted by Father General to the novitiate and later to profession.

He began his novitiate in Paramaribo under Bishop Swinkels and in the company of Rev. J. Romme. He left Batavia early in October and reached the city on 14th. On 1st November he received the religious habit from the hands of his Bishop and novice master. Needless to say, the novitiate did not provide total seclusion and undisturbed attention to the spiritual life: fewness of numbers made it necessary for the two novices to assist the community and to take their share of the apostolic works with the other Fathers.

Both were clearly priests of proven virtue, and Rev. Donders was already in his fifty-seventh year. With a dispensation from Father General the novitiate was shortened, so that on 24th June 1867 after a retreat of two weeks they made their religious profession in the hands of Bishop Swinkels. Father Donders remained in the city until 13th August, when he was sent once more to Batavia to relieve the two Fathers who were recalled from there. A few weeks later he was joined by Father Verbeek¹².

This was his home until February 1883, and except for a space of two years he always had another Father as companion. At the be-

¹¹ This is the only indication of how heavy the demand was on Father Donders during his ten years in Batavia before the coming of the Redemptorists.

¹² Father Gerard Verbeek was born 14 II 1820 and ordained 20 XII 1845. He was professed as a Redemptorist 15 X 1860.

ginning of 1868 he began to work for the conversion of the Indians who lived about the regions of the Upper Saramacca, the Coppename, the Tibiti, the Wayombo and the Maratacca. From that time he would usually spend about half of each month in these works away from the mission. In the course of fifteen years he baptised about six hundred Indians, most of them children. Since the encampments rarely contained more than about five hundred souls, the average of forty baptisms a year must be considered very high.

After the good Father had been in Batavia fifteen years and had been without a companion from September 1880 to January 1883, he was transferred to the city, where he was stationed from February to 2nd November 1883. From 3rd November 1883 to 9th November 1885 he was at Coronie with Father Romme.

When Father van Coll had to leave Batavia and go to Europe, Father Donders went there to take his place. After fourteen months back in Batavia he took his departure for eternal life.

Wherever he went he always won the praise of everyone for his virtue. His fellow missionaries called him « holy Father Donders ». He has merited beyond doubt to be numbered among the sons of St. Alphonsus and to join those who surround our Holy Father's throne in heaven to praise the mercies of the Lord for ever.

I must now speak of his holy death and his edifying life. Father Romme, who succeeded his dead confrere in Batavia on 16th January, gathered information from Father John Bakker. He was himself for some years a witness of the life and virtues of the saintly man. He is my chief source for what I write. First I shall give some details of his last sickness and his beautiful death and then some general remarks concerning his saintly life.

I

According to the doctors his last illness was an inflammation of the kidneys. About a month before his death he had mentioned to his companion, Father John Bakker, that he was experiencing some pain and some blockage of the kidneys. From that time for his own peace of mind the Father often asked him how he was, always getting the reply: « Quite well, a little better if anything ».

Things went on this way up to the last day of the year, when he preached in the evening. Even while he was at recreation he said not a word about feeling ill. That same night, however, his condition became so acute that he had to call his companion, and he summoned the doctor. It was only after two days that various medica-

tions were able to afford some relief, only to reveal how advanced the inflammation had become.

From that evening he no longer left his room. On the night between 5th and 6th January he asked for the holy Sacraments, and Father John administered them at once. On this occasion he asked his confrere to do two things for him, first to ask pardon of the people if he had in any way offended any of them, and secondly to tell them how sad he was that many of them were still leading sinful lives in spite of all his instructions. Father John performed this charge with great emotion during Holy Mass on the feast of the Epiphany.

Apart from that occasion Father Donders hardly spoke at all during his illness, making no complaints, always satisfied with what was given him. He suffered in this way, totally submissive to God's Holy Will and with his mind fixed on Jesus and the things of heaven, without a moment's delirium until 3.30 p.m. of Friday 14th January 1887. At that moment the good, zealous, holy, exemplary old man gave up his beautiful soul to his heavenly Father, leaving us the sweet confidence that he received the crown of justice, if not immediately after death, then without a long delay in Purgatory.

The next day his body, clothed in the habit, lay in the church during Mass, which was attended by the faithful. In the afternoon he was buried with as much ceremony as was possible in the presence of the entire population of Batavia. The sacred rites were performed by Fathers A. de Kuyper and J. Bakker. Father de Kuyper had arrived the day before, an hour after the Father's death, bringing with him a trainee doctor for the hospital named Batemburg. At the burial he edified all present by his sincere words on the holy life and blessed death of the venerable old man.

Whoever knew the saintly man called him blessed. Would that our end should be like his. His body was buried beside the grave of Rev. G. Heinink, who had died in Batavia in 1849.

II

« With regard to his exemplary life », so Father Romme wrote to me, « I would gladly send you an account of some incidents or great works — extraordinary things are expected of men like Father Donders who have a reputation for holiness — but you know very well yourself that his beauty was mainly within, that in his humility he was always careful to serve God in silence, never making an out-

ward show of virtue, so that nothing extraordinary was to be seen in his day to day conduct ».

I fully agree with what Father Romme wrote; but I would add that Father Donders was an extraordinary man, but in the ordinary way of virtue and holiness. What we admire most in many of the saints is the extraordinary gift of miracles, prophecies and special gifts, together with extraordinary ways of contemplation and unusual gifts of soul and body, by which one becomes mighty in word and work, making wonderful conversions and performing great deeds and winning glory for oneself. Peter Donders in his humility was not a saint of that sort: as is well known, he was poorly rather than richly endowed in body and soul. He had not the voice, the stature, the ability, the eloquence or the knowledge to win renown. His greatness was in his virtue, in his humility, his mortification, his modesty, meekness, patience, obedience, poverty, love of God, spirit of prayer and his burning zeal for souls. With this comment, I return to what Father Romme has written.

« I knew him for about twenty-three years in the colony, first as a secular priest, then as a fellow novice and finally as a confrere in the Congregation. I often worked with him in Paramaribo, Coronie and Batavia, and I have to say that everywhere and in everything I found him a source of edification. Even though he was more than twenty years older than me and more than twenty years longer in the colony, he obeyed me always with the simplicity of a child and with the utmost submission. In fact, the more work I gave him and the harder, the better he liked it. One has to say that he tried to excel in all the virtues; and if he heard or read something of some saint or other that moved him, then he did his utmost to imitate it. In particular, what impressed me most was his effort to excel in prayer, mortification and zeal for souls ».

These three virtues, which were beyond doubt characteristic of Father Donders, should be briefly described.

His Love of Prayer

Besides the meditations and prayers prescribed by the Church and the Rule, when he was at home and his duties permitted it, he used to spend an hour in prayer morning and evening before the Blessed Sacrament. At the time of a community exercise in the church or oratory he would be in his place before the signal, already preparing himself by prayer. With his superior's permission he used

to get up every night to spend a long time before the Blessed Sacrament. How much time he spent in prayer when he was alone in Batavia or travelling in a tent-boat to a distant Indian camp is known only to heaven.

He said many ejaculatory prayers. Whenever the clock struck, even if he was with his confreres at recreation, the movement of his lips showed he was saying a prayer, probably an *Ave Maria*.

If the conversation was about worldly things or the news of the day, he was uninterested: he rarely joined in the talk; and in fact some times he began to nod. But if the talk was about a spiritual topic, about the life of a saint, the Church or the Pope, then he was all attention and only too ready to join in.

Until he was an old man he usually prayed on his knees or walking up and down in the church. The tracks worn into the floors of the churches in Batavia and Coronie bear witness to the thousands of paces he took in his prayer. His constant prayer is to be admired especially in that it did not seem that he was able to call on some source of prayer, either natural or supernatural, but was rather dry and hesitant of speech in God's presence. And God on His part gave him only sparingly of that delight by which the soul is drawn and made rich in heart and voice and is even taken up to contemplation.

His prayer was much more frequently vocal than mental, and he depended on the frequent recitation of the rosary, spiritual reading and the use of prayer books to arouse and nourish his devotion. During the night, perhaps, he would occasionally hear the Lord's voice more clearly, see the light of heaven and open his heart in tender and fervent expressions of love. Sometimes a confrere caught a glimpse of him during the night in Coronie and Batavia, and he was seen by the light of the sanctuary lamp kneeling on the altar steps.

In Batavia when the Angelus bell rang, he knelt at once, wherever he was, even in the street.

These are just a few signs of his piety; and I think I can say that his way of speaking with God remained always the same. It was always substantially the same, though there might have been some slight variation in unimportant things.

His Love of Mortification

If I have said he was a man of prayer, then of necessity I must say also that he was a mortified man. There can be a mortifi-

cation that is in a sense natural. Education, bodily health, various circumstances, all require that a man be more or less mortified, so that he takes it for granted. This was certainly the case with Father Donders. But the extent and the motives of his continual and extraordinary mortification make us say that in his case it was supernatural and almost heroic.

During the time he was a missionary his constitution was strong and healthy, needing good food; and one who watched him closely could not fail to notice that he liked his food and drink. When he was with others or in the community, he concealed his spirit of mortification as much as possible, fitting in with the others. But when he was alone, he was satisfied with what was least appetising. It was often noticed, for example, that if there was a choice at table between a loaf of bread that was fresh, soft and tasty and another that was old and hard and mouldy, he would choose the latter, scraping away a little of the mould.

When he was alone at Batavia and happened to know that there was some food in the house that the servant had forgotten to bring, he would never ask for it, even when it was something he liked. He was fond of chocolate; and though he lived where there was an abundance of cacao, he preferred to go without the chocolate and sell all the cacao rather than offend the slaves by satisfying his own taste. He was never heard to complain if something was not ready or was badly prepared.

When he was alone he usually drank nothing but water. On his journeys he took beer and wine; but ordinarily drank river water and gave the beer to the boatmen and the Indians, if he was allowed by obedience.

He kept the fast days of the Church and the Rule up to his seventy-fifth year, and then at his superior's orders he would take a piece of bread in the morning. He obeyed the command indeed, but saw that the piece of bread was as small as possible.

In the last years of his life he usually slept on bare boards; and he took the discipline nearly every night and morning when he was at home in Batavia or Coronie. Also when he was at home he would wear a cilice each morning. He had so completely controlled natural repugnance at visiting and helping the poor lepers, even the most deformed, that he never gave the least sign of disgust or horror.

Finally, there is the work he did alone at Batavia for years and years without another priest, all those journeys by river in all sorts of weather, circumstances and dangers, living all the time with people who were uneducated, vicious and ungrateful. To live happily

like that and to go on for so many years demands a spirit of mortification in a very high degree. Truly, if this be not heroic mortification, it seems very little short of it.

His Love of Neighbour and Zeal for Souls

A burning zeal for souls brought him to Surinam, kept him there for more than forty-four years working for the poorest, most ungrateful and most abandoned, and made him a true apostle of Jesus Christ crucified in his heart and seeking only that his Divine Master be known and loved. That zeal was just as strong in his seventy-seventh year as it was when he came to the colony at the age of thirty-three. If anything, it was stronger and more solid. His zeal is shown by the innumerable obstacles, the thousand and one setbacks on his journeys, on the plantations and among the Indians which he faced, though results were so meagre in Batavia and on his expeditions, especially among the Caribs.

One needs to know a ministry like this from experience or close at hand really to know it and understand its hardship and its worth. The people of Surinam, Protestants, Jews and Catholics, esteemed the man of God, not for any outward gifts or talents, but for his goodness and for his sacrificing himself for the good of the poorest, the most despised and the most abandoned. Father Romme has given me some instances of his zeal.

He fell sick shortly after he came to Coronie and was not able to visit the Catholic parishioners. This was a work especially dear to him, and yet Father Romme never heard him express the least complaint, annoyance, impatience or regret and never saw in him the least sign of anything of the kind. He saw everything that happened and every disappointment with the eyes of faith, seeing God's Will, so that he was always at peace and happy in the arms of Divine Providence. But as soon as he was able to go out again he was busy morning and evening visiting the sick, teaching the ignorant and searching out the backsliders.

Again, when he and Father Romme were together at Coronie, they used to take turns to visit the two succursal churches at Burnside and Welgelegen. It so happened that part of the road to Welgelegen was subject to flooding so as to become impassable to vehicles and could be used only by one on horseback. Since the old man could not ride a horse, he had to give up his turn to Father Romme.

The kindly and zealous old man found this hard; and as soon as Father Romme would get home he would question him about the flooding, if it was going down and how soon it would be fit for the buggy.

It seems to me that I may finish at this point and use the words with which Father Romme ended his letter on the death and virtues of Father Donders last January. « These are the few things I thought I should write about the life of our truly holy Father Donders. I am quite sure he possesses the reward of his saintly life among the blessed and with St. Alphonsus, and that he is a powerful mediator in heaven for the Congregation and for the mission of Surinam ».

Paramaribo, 26th March 1887

Adrian Bossers C.S.S.R.,
Chronista and Archivist of the
Mission of Surinam.

V

Extract from the *Batavia Chronicles*
written by Father Donders and concerning him¹³

The Indians

May 1868

The Indians are the original inhabitants of Surinam. They used to be quite numerous, but through their misuse of alcohol and their very disorderly lives they have dwindled very much. There are three tribes, each with its own language, very different from those of the others: the Caribs, the Arrowaks and the Warros. Through association with the Negroes and Coloureds, most of them speak and understand pidgin English, with the exception of the women, children and old men of the Caribs. They all used to be pagans, but I have not found among them any idolatry in the proper sense of the word.

¹³ Document XVIII of the *Summarium*, I in the process at Paramaribo. Father Donders is speaking about the beginning of his work among the Indians and recording what he had gathered for himself about them by observation and some study in all probability.

They have magicians or witch doctors, whom they call *Paije* — doctors, or *Padjassi* — great doctors. They have no word to mean God: the word *Tamvesie* in their language also means grandfather. They believe vaguely that there is some sort of life above. In the history of Surinam we learn that in the past some ministers of the Moravian Brethren began to preach to the Arrowaks in Nickerie, but they did not continue. Some French priests, too, from Manna in Cayenne baptised many children, so Bishop Grooff said, near the river Marowijne. Since, however, the Indians are nomads, wandering about the whole region, nothing can be done with them unless they are properly instructed.

I attempted this several times in the past, when I was working among the lepers here in Batavia, but without success. Now that we have two Fathers here, I thought I should try another way, for it is truly a matter of sorrow that these poor people, redeemed just like ourselves by the precious Blood of Jesus Christ, should live and die under the power of the devil. I, therefore, wrote to ask the Bishop to allow me by way of experiment to seek out and instruct them in their own houses and encampments. The Bishop agreed and readily commended the work. Really, of the Indians and of some of the Negroes it can be said in these parts: *Compelle intrare*, as Jesus said in the Gospel.

My first visit was to the river Tibiti, ten or twelve hours from Batavia. The babies there have been baptised and the older children and adults are being instructed for holy baptism (Caribs).

At the river called the Wayombo again almost all the children (Caribs) were baptised and the rest are under instruction. This is a slow procedure. The *Our Father* and so on must be repeated hundreds of times for them before they can keep anything in their memories, but as always there are exceptions.

On the Upper Saramacca twenty-five hours from Batavia in the opposite direction there are many Arrowaks, more civilised, better clothed and with a better knowledge of pidgin English. I baptised not only the children but the adults as well, married them and gave some of them Communion.

Seven hours further on there are Caribs, who at first refused, but now give hope that they can be taught. The biggest difficulty in their regard is to get them together, because they live a distance of some hours from the river, so that many streams have to be travelled in a canoe, which is a hollowed out tree trunk. If we could bring all the Indians together, at least each tribe, and if we had enough Fathers for two to stay with The Caribs, then with God's

help, without which we can do nothing, we could make something out of them.

First one has to win their confidence, because they are suspicious, especially the so-called witch doctors or magicians. I have seen the way these *Piajmans* or witch doctors behave. In the beginning they tried to tell the rest that I was going to take away all their children after I baptised them. When that did not happen, they said the children would all die; and once that was seen to be false, several of them agreed that the children be baptised.

One Indian said to me that if one could not be saved without baptism, he preferred not to be baptised so as not to be separated from his ancestors. I asked him to come with me to the church (a hut consisting of four or five poles and a roof of branches) where I was to celebrate Mass. He promised and came along. After Mass he said to his wife: « Let us have our baby baptised ». I thanked God and did it at once.

An Indian woman was very ill, and I thought she could live only a few days, since she was unable to eat. The witch doctor or magician was worn out with practising his arts. He would suck a hand or an arm, blow in tobacco smoke and suck it out again. He would go through this process of sucking breathing tobacco and sucking and then stand up and breathe out the evil spirit into his hands. I asked him if the woman would get well, and he answered he had no idea, since he had not been a magician for long. I asked the woman if she preferred to be baptised, and she agreed. I did what I could to teach her the most necessary truths and dispose her as well as I could to contrition, and then, telling her to have nothing more to do with these foolish practices, baptised her. To my amazement the woman did not die. She got better, but fell back into her old ways. I think she is still alive, though this happened five months ago.

The Caribs are almost naked, but are learning modesty, and some of them are getting themselves clothes. I am constantly urging the rest to buy clothes. When they work cutting timber or sarsaparilla wood they can get money or clothes; but they prefer to buy alcohol. The Coloureds and some Europeans provide them with spirits for their own material gain.

The Arrowaks and Warros are better clothed, more civilised and not as much given to alcohol as the Caribs.

The Caribs — their way of life — houses — clothing

These people live in the bush, generally preferring the higher ground. They live by hunting and fishing and they grow cassava, bananas and the like.

They use bows and arrows. Some, many of them in fact, have guns. They work for the Europeans and the Coloureds, cutting sarsaparilla wood and clearing land, being paid in alcoholic drink (rum), tobacco and clothes. Generally speaking, they do not live long on account of the abuse of alcohol; and for this they blame the Europeans and others through whom they get the liquor (gin and rum).

When these cannot be obtained, they make an alcoholic drink they call *tapana* or *wokoe* from the ripe cassava (*Iatropa*). They also have a reddish coloured drink they call *kasve* and another that is black and called *pajewaroe*. There are some exceptions, persons who reach a fairly advanced age.

Their Houses

Their houses or huts are open to the air at both ends and can not be locked. Furniture consists of hammocks, bows and arrows, guns and fish hooks. The women make the hammocks from cotton, and with a certain type of clay mixed with bark of a tree they make pitchers and dishes of various sizes. They also work in the field and do the cooking, so that they work much harder than the men.

Ordinarily, they are practically naked, with large knives in their belts. Now, as a result of our urging, they are starting to buy clothes for themselves. They are at home in the water: everyone can swim, men women and children. They use canoes made by hollowing out tree trunks.

Their Religion

Last century ministers of the Moravian Brethren began to evangelise the Arrowaks, but had to give up. Some little children were baptised in various places by Bishop Grooff and the early priests. If they survived beyond the age of seven, there was no provision for further care of them. Many people near the river Marowijne were also baptised by French priests from Cayenne.

We have begun now to visit and teach them in the places where they live; and it is necessary to keep this up if we want to have any hope for them. It would be good if we could bring them together; but that is not possible, because they live by hunting and fishing, which means that they cannot be restricted to a particular place. They now live scattered about in small groups: in many cases just a few families live together. By God's goodness, though, we are not losing heart that if we win their confidence and God gives His help, without which we can do nothing, we shall overcome every difficulty. By now I have reached the point when nearly all of the children have been baptised.

The Arrowaks

These are better clothed, work well, understand and speak pidgin English better than the Caribs; but they are few in numbers and they, too, are scattered about the country. Among them not only the children, but also the adults have been baptised. Some, too, have been married and admitted to first Communion.

I have occasionally seen some Warros, and I have baptised a few of their children. These people are fewer in number. Perhaps at some later time I shall be in a position to write more about them.

These three tribes have languages that are different the one from the other.