

Introduction

Peter Donders arrived in Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam, in 1842, one year after his priestly ordination in Oegstgeest (Netherlands).

The letter is addressed to Reverend Gerard van Someren. Gerardus Walterus van Someren (16 August 1802 – 15 October 1888) first was professor of philosophy of Peter Donders at the minor seminary and then professor of theology at the major seminary in Haaren.

In that time, there were no dioceses in the Netherlands yet. In the north of the country there were archpriests, in the south apostolic vicariates. The episcopal hierarchy was reestablished on 4 March 1853.

To the Rev. Gerard Walter van Someren.

To the greater glory of God

Paramaribo, September 8, 1846

Reverend Father and Friend,

For so long, I have really wanted to write to Your Reverence, but could not fulfill my desire, since so many constant duties kept me from doing so. Do not think, my great and unforgettable friend, that I forgot you and the blessings you provided me so often and so generously. No, Reverend Father, not a single day passes that I do not think of you and remember you in my poor prayers and Masses. I hope, by the grace of God, to be able to [remember you] until the day I die. To give you a proof of my thanks and appreciation, I begin this letter, which by the help of God and whenever time allows, I hope to finish. I write, on one hand, to fulfill my word given long ago, and on the other, to repay Your Reverence through this detailed narration of the events that have kept me from writing you for so long.

I hope that you received my last letter, written in 1843, the letter that the unforgettable Father Monsignor Grooff¹ took on his voyage to our homeland. In it I congratulated Your Reverence for your nomination as parish priest in Eindhoven and as dean of the district, something I wanted to briefly mention along with the important news of our mission published in *Godsdienstvriend*² in January of 1845. Now, to my narrative.

Earlier, I promised Your Reverence that I would tell you something about this colony, which is what I want to do right now in the best way possible. If this following picture does not contain anything to please (you), at least I hope Your Reverence will receive it kindly.

To give you an idea of this colony, think of a great and widespread forest, such as the Creator made to spring up with his word, He commanded and they were created³. It stretches wider than a sixty-hour trek [along the coast] and extends back [toward the mountains] I have no idea exactly how far. Imagine, then, that this extensive area is filled with every kind of bush and tree, so numerous in their diversity that they cannot be counted; full of every kind of wild animal: tigers, monkeys, etc. There are, as well, a great number of snakes, many of which are very venomous. Imagine as well that this rugged forest is criss-crossed by many rivers and torrents with all kinds of fish, including sharks and crocodiles.

¹ Monsignor Jacobus Grooff (20 September 1800 - 29 April 1852) was the apostolic prefect of Surinam, who, in 1839, during his visit to the major seminary at Haaren, tried to recruit priests for Surinam.

² A conservative magazine for a wide audience, started in 1818 by Joachim George Le Sage ten Broek and continuing for more than half a century, with abundant church news from home and abroad.

³ Psalm 32:9 and 148:5.

Though the country is generally very fertile, still very little of it is cultivated since, up to the present, the cultivation has been done solely by slaves, because the natives and the free people, especially in the city, are too lazy and proud to do this kind of work. Certainly there is a great number of plantations outside the city of Paramaribo, which looks little like a city and at times seems to be buried in the middle of the forest. However, because the number of slaves is diminishing, many of these plantations are abandoned.

The principal products of the plantations are sugar, coffee, and cocoa. Rice and turkey corn also grow here very abundantly. The principal food of the slaves is bananas, which grow on a kind of tree, as well as other fruits, which this year, because of an extraordinarily long drought, have produced almost nothing. Because of all this, we find that dire poverty has taken over.

The primitive inhabitants of this region are the Amerindians, whose skin is copper-colored. Almost all of these live far from the city and along two large rivers, the Marowijne, which is near the border with French Guiana, and the Corantyn, which forms the frontier with British Guiana. These people are free, but they live in a completely savage state, and they are still sunk in the darkness of paganism. The second group is constituted by the Maroons, with black skins. For a long time, they have been independent of the government. The third group is formed by the slaves. Brought here from Africa in the past, they are also black-skinned. Now, however, they are of all colors because of their intermingling with Europeans of dissolute morals. In earlier times their number was very large. Now it has greatly diminished and is continuing to grow smaller due in part to their disorderly lives, etc., and also in part (and not a small part) because of inhuman treatment, bordering on "torture." Then to this must be added the lack of the food necessary for life, above all considering the terribly hard work they have to undertake. All of this has been aggravated this year by the lack of bananas, mentioned above.

To my way of looking at it, however; it is evident that, above all, one has to see here the hand of God who wishes to say, "This far and no more. Oh, if here they took even as much care of the health and well-being of their slaves as people in Europe take of their pack animals, the situation would improve. If only I could recount everything on this topic that I have seen and that I heard ... But I prefer to pass over this in silence because it is beyond anything you can imagine. I tremble whenever I think of them. And so I prefer to limit myself to crying out with profound pity:

"Woe, woe to Surinam on that great day of judgment!! Woe, woe, indeed, a thousand woes to the Europeans, owners of the slaves on the plantations, to the administrators, to the directors, to the foremen (who have authority over the slaves)!!! Damned are those who enrich themselves with the sweat and blood of these unfortunate people who have no one to defend them except God!"

It is no surprise, then, that the Holy Father Gregory XVI of happy memory published bulls⁴ and petitions trying to completely suppress the slave-trade and to bring these people liberty. You, Reverend Father, will possibly think now that this will threaten to be the ruin of the Dutch government because it has yet to suppress the slave trade ... Yes, and God knows this! ...

It is not necessary to describe to Your Reverence the moral situation. It is enough to tell you that everything seems to conspire to its destruction without anyone, outside of ourselves, trying to oppose it. Here we find ourselves alone in the fight against the immense torrent of impiety, without any other weapons than the cross and our confidence in God. Idolatry as well has few other opponents than us. In earlier days, the government prohibited and punished it. Now, however, it is ignored. This is due to the fact that many Protestants, precisely the most respected, are attached to it to such a degree that one can say they have reverted to pagandom. O what times! O what morals!

⁴ See *In supremo Apostolatus fastigio* of 3 December 1839 at www.stclemens.org/PeterDonders/ under 'Letters'.

The different sects present in the colony are: (1) Lutherans, (2) Calvinists, (3) Moravian Brethren, and (4) Jews. The Moravian Brethren are the most pernicious of all. Except for us, they are the only ones who take any interest in the slaves and freed Blacks. Unfortunately they do this with great success, since by their teachings and their tolerance, they win over the majority of the slaves. Just to give Your Reverence some examples. Without any qualms, they baptize those who are cohabiting with four or even five black women, and only require them to promise that, once one of the women dies, they will not take another one in her place. It is true that they have a type of marriage, but they can also dissolve it in their own way, etc. The administration of baptism, above all in its form⁵, is very doubtful as to its validity.

To this we must add that many Protestants, and above all the Jews, all oblige their slaves to attend the instruction of the Brethren. If the slaves were truly free, I believe that fewer would go, since the Brethren are not the very popular, at least with many people, because of their love of money and because they mix business with everything. They oblige the slaves, and even the freemen, to buy in their stores, because, so people say, they make the slaves believe that all of the things they sell are blessed, etc.

Your Reverence may think that, because of all this, they are numerous. No. Here in the city their membership comprises fewer slaves and freemen than we do. Moreover, one must take into account that they have been active much longer than we have, and second, that everything, from the side of the government as well as from the side of the slave-owners, favors them in everything. Furthermore they have access to many plantations, something denied us, but all things considered, it does not amount to much.

For example, they teach them something to sing, and then they began, as I've heard from others, to read to the slaves a chapter of the prophet Isaiah in Pidgin English, which they themselves translate, instead of first teaching them to know God. In this way, they make them well-read persons. This I have often experienced among those who, even after some twenty years of instruction at their hands, ask us to be admitted into the true Church. These persons, who after a great many years of instruction and who many times have participated in the Lord's supper understand nothing of the mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, etc., like all Protestants.

Finally, what I can still say in general, is that in this colony, loyalty and honesty are very rare. Instead, each one tries to cheat the other as often as possible. Lawsuits and bankruptcies are now the order of the day. Yes, Reverend Father, the situation of the colony is so bad that it seems to be very close to complete ruin. It is not surprising that the Good God wishes to punish it in his own time. Such iniquity and godlessness: how often does one see people who, having enriched themselves and amassing fortunes by usury and every kind of injustice and mistreatment of the slaves (at the cost of their sweat and blood), are now completely ruined. Their goods have been sold by judicial order. The houses where they formerly lived look like stables for horses and, what is more, they go around bearing the pain of their condemnation on their faces. The same thing is happening in the plantations, many of which are under judicial sequestration this year.

At least I hope that, by the grace of God, all this will accelerate the freeing of the slaves. Yes, the God of Goodness, as I hope, in his mercy and justice, will mitigate the condition of the slaves, so degraded, so long oppressed, and will give them the liberty by which they can recognize him as their creator and serve him with sincerity. Oh yes, then we will have open before us an immense field of labor! May the Good God grant us this!

As to the interior of the country, regarding the morality and customs of the Amerindians and the Maroons, I cannot tell Your Reverence very much, since we have yet to work among these people. I certainly hope that we will soon have this satisfaction, something which I have desired for a

⁵ Form: words and use of streaming water.

long time. I've heard it said that the indigenous people who are furthest from the city are very industrious agriculturists, although many others are very lazy ... What the situation may really be like, I cannot tell you with any certainty. May the Good God grant that we can illumine with the light of Faith these unfortunate people who still lie in darkness and the shadow of death.⁶ And then I shall give Your Reverence more details about them.

In the meantime, I recommend these unfortunate people to your pious prayer and your Masses. From time to time, I see those living in the vicinity in small groups in the city. I have verified that they are very happy to wear clothing to cover their nakedness; this gives me much hope that they may become civilized and also converted. I've also heard they usually cohabit with one woman and have an aversion to theft, which is mostly the opposite among the Blacks. Both of these qualities give me a quiet hope for the future, if the Good God, without whom we can do nothing, hears our prayer and blesses our work.

The "Protestant European Colonization" that has worked here for the last two years, as Your Reverence will know, has had little success. Up to now [it has made] an enormous expenditure to no avail. The survivors (half of them have died) have accomplished almost nothing, and do not want to work, or do so poorly as far as moral improvement is concerned. Pastor Van den Brandhof, who has been knighted by his Majesty, will eventually not come out very well from this. No, my Venerable Friend, this is no work for Protestantism; they cannot do it and they never will.

In regard to the well-being and prosperity of the colony, it seems to be struggling with its last gasps to avoid total collapse. His Excellency, Governor Raders, has thought of a way of getting the free natives of the city to undertake manual labor and to gradually accustom them to it. This is because it was hitherto considered to be unbearably shameful for a free person to have to work, even if they were forced to beg for alms. Work was something for slaves. The project consists in digging a canal from the city to Post-Groeningen (a European colony).

His Excellency encourages them by giving them a florin each day and this is in silver coin (which is more valuable here than Surinamese paper money since the silver florins are worth 30 to 40 percent more). Women receive fifty cents a day. The idea is to give them land to cultivate once they get used to work, so that in the first place they can produce their food themselves. Then later they can cultivate sugar cane, when the forests have been cleared and it can all be properly drained. As I see it, Your Reverence, this is something which looks good in theory, however everyone here asks: will it last, what will become of it?. And so on. To date, it is going well. The governor formally inaugurated this project on August 31 and 230 men and women are now employed on it. They work from six to eleven in the morning, and in the afternoon from three to six, to earn their money. Will it continue? This is a question only time can answer. Moreover, we have another question, what will happen with the morals of people? Will they improve with this joint labor? My answer is no. Anyway, may God grant us the best and preserve what is good.

My Esteemed Master and Best Friend, from this you can form a general sketch of the country and its present situation, a picture, which, as I said at the beginning, does not offer a very attractive prospect. And from all this, Your Reverence form an idea of the many difficulties we must contend with, and see furthermore that Faith and morality cannot advance quickly until the slave trade and the plantation system have been totally destroyed, as in North America, where they deal with free persons.

Certainly we have among the slaves and the recently freed people many good Catholics. No Sunday passes but that several attend the Lord's Mass and there are crowds on each first Sunday of the month, and holy day of obligation. Also, since my arrival, many of the slaves and recently

⁶ Psalm 107:10, Matthew 4:16.

freed people have married. This is enough to give Your Reverence a superficial impression of affairs. In case Your Reverence requires more particulars, be so kind as to let me know and to give me your questions. I will gladly answer them.

May I ask Your Reverence for the favor of sharing the content of this letter with, the Reverend Father Pastor, W. van de Ven⁷ in Tilburg, or even of passing on the letter itself once you have read it?

Well, I must conclude. Cordial greetings and best wishes for God's blessings, I remain with a heart full of gratitude to Your Reverence, your most affectionate son and friend in Jesus Christ,

P. Donders, Apostolic Missionary
Today, December 5

PS: Cordial greetings to Your Reverence's sister, your brother-in-law, and their children, and finally, please, if you have the opportunity, to Monsignor H. den Dubbelden⁸, to the Reverend Father Rector, and the professors at the seminary, etc.

⁷ Pastor Wilhelmus van de Ven (28 August 1793 – 17 March 1882) was parish priest of the Goirkese church in Tilburg, where Peter Donders celebrated his first mass in 1841 and gave a farewell sermon in 1842, and where today his baptismal font is placed. He was one of the benefactors who sponsored the studies of Peter Donders at the minor seminary.

⁸ Henricus den Dubbelden (14 December 1769 - 13 October 1851), apostolic vicar of 's-Hertogenbosch and titular bishop of Emmaüs, ordered the construction of the major seminary at Haaren. In 1839, he blessed the Goirkese church (which was not dedicated until 4 July 1843).