

## **Preface**

This is the translation of an article written by Fr. Martinus Noordermeer, OMI, the priest who accompanies those on pilgrimage to Batavia, the place in Suriname where Blessed Peter Donders lived and worked for 27 years among those suffering from Hansen's disease, then known as leprosy. It was published in the Paramaribo diocesan weekly, OMHOOG, in January 2019. The Dutch author of the book, *Een vlek op de rug* (A macule on the back), by J. van de Walle, from which the main part of the text has been taken, lived from 1912 to 2000. He lived in Suriname from 1942 to 1946. The book was published in 1963. The fourth edition was printed in 2001. The title refers literally to the first symptom of Hansen's disease, an area of skin discoloration, a macule, spot, or stain, as well as figuratively to the colonial society of Suriname, where the culture of slavery reigned and was a stain on colonial life. J. van de Walle has written several historical novels. The text is provided with the consent of Fr. Noordermeer.

## ***From the book 'A macule on the back' by J. van de Walle* by Fr. Martinus Noordermeer, OMI**

It is interesting to note that our Blessed Father Donders is spoken of and written about respectfully in Surinamese literature. In the book *Een vlek op de rug* (A macule on the back), by J. van de Walle, Achille van der Maas, writing in the first person, speaks about a small, rustic man, dressed like the Catholic priests at Haarlem. Achille came from Heemstede, near Haarlem. The man, dressed in a black cassock, spoke with a southern accent, by which Achille meant the accent of one from Brabant.

Achille first met this priest in 1842, during his first week in Suriname. One night, when returning home from a party, he headed in the wrong direction and came across the small priest, whom, of course, we immediately recognize as our Blessed Peter Donders. Achille was pretty tipsy. To be clear, he was drunk. He was happy to come across someone who could give him some directions. He walked toward the small priest and asked him: "I have lost my way. I am looking for the home of the Konings family." The priest knew the house and invited Achille to walk with him. "I am on my way to the hospital to anoint a seriously ill person, and it is on the way." The two walked along, side by side. Neither spoke much, perhaps waiting for the other to start a conversation. When they reached the Konings family home, Achille recognized it and thanked the priest. The priest answered: "Brother, in the darkness of this night, you lost your way, but now have found your way home. Remember, you must never lose your way to the House of the Lord, your God. That would be much worse."

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Years later, after Achille had matured and shown himself able to organize, work and administer, he was assigned to a plantation on the Commewijne River, with the beautiful name Rust en Vrede (Rest and Peace). Here he met the priest again. Late one evening, he was notified that there was a tent-boat approaching, which wanted to moor at the plantation's dock. Achille walked to the pier to welcome the guest. To his surprise, and perhaps even with some joy, he recognized the person getting out of the boat as the small priest who had showed him the way home during his first week in Suriname. He also remembered immediately the wish of the priest, that he should never lose his way to God. The priest was warmly welcomed into the administrator's house.

As usual, in honor of the guest, a copious meal was prepared, with selected wines. In this way Achille was trying to show the priest that in just three years he had developed into the administrator of a plantation, which is often determined by other administrators, according to the amount and variety of wines in the cellar. He was surprised by the sobriety and asceticism of the small priest who only inquired about the possibility of eventually giving the Christian slaves a little religious education. Achille was conflicted within himself. Was he not losing his way to God?

"Just give me cassava with dried fish and a glass of rain water. With this I am more than satisfied," the priest said. His refusal of the well-prepared supper, with delicious roast game and fine wines greatly irritated Achille and gave him reason to consider forbidding the religious instruction of the Christian slaves. He remembered well the pastor who, during his youth at Heemstede, had spoken in all his sermons about exaggerated luxuries, excessive consumption of alcohol and a loose sexual life. All of this came to mind again.

It became a strange evening, not as Achille had imagined it would be; that is, a pleasant evening of conversation with a white man, with whom he could speak about things he could not tell others on the plantation. After Achilles enjoyed the copious meal and the many types of wine, the priest returned to his tent-boat. His rowers had gone to the plantation to sleep among the other slaves. He was alone on the tent-boat.

Achille could not sleep. The priest had shown him a different way of life, which awakened something in him. How could the priest sleep amidst the mosquitoes and other insects? Achille arose, got dressed and went to the river where the priest's tent-boat was moored. We now quote directly from the book: "I walked very quietly, because I would have hated to be thought a spy. The moonlight enabled me to glance inside the tent-boat, where I saw the priest on his knees, his hands folded on his chest, firmly holding a crucifix, his eyes closed, deep in prayer, a prayer during which his lips moved ever so gently. I don't know how long I remained watching the priest, but as I did, I felt swarms of mosquitoes draining my blood, even through my pants. How was it possible, I wondered to myself, unsuccessfully chasing off these blood-sucking pests, that the priest could remain there, motionless in prayer? There is no way he could not have felt the biting mosquitoes.

"But, bitten or not, he continued speaking to our Lord. And what would he have asked Him? Of course, I could not simply pucker my lips and whistle in order to disturb the priest in his conversation with God. One does not do this. But I felt like doing it, just to hear from his own mouth what he was discussing with our Lord.

"Because, while watching him, it seemed to me that this small man of God, not noticing my presence, really was speaking with the transcendent, whoever that might be, in a different, infinitely calmer, more tranquil and less noisy manner than the Negroes speak to their gods.

"And suddenly I realized – oh, pastor from Heemstede, this might surprise you – that I was a pagan: a lost man in the eyes of the priest, no different than a kind of madman, a misplaced, lonely person. Tired and confused, I walked home." (p. 140)

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At that time, around 1863, Mr. Bos and Mr. Konings were the largest merchants in Suriname, manifesting the spirit of their superiors in the motherland, in particular the bosses in Amsterdam. They had oversight of all the plantations: the size of each one, the administration, the number of slaves, the yields and the status of the books, expenses and income.

But suddenly Mr. Konings, the great businessman, died. Not yet buried, speculation circulated about who might replace him. Quickly Achille van der Maas, administrator of the much-praised Rust en Vrede plantation, attracted attention. He was different from many of the other administrators: he didn't drink too much, had only one wife and a well-ordered administration; in a word, a well-qualified candidate.

He was expected to take the place of Mr. Konings and was immediately sent to make an extended appraisal of all the plantations in Suriname that fell under the Dutch protectorate. He had to make many long journeys, a time-consuming and arduous task. Near the end of his travels, he visited the plantations along the Coppename River. His party was already told in advance, up- and downstream, to avoid Batavia, to give it a wide berth, for it was popularly known as a place with a very acrid smell, due to an incomparable contagious disease.

They were rowing against the current, and this was actually fatal, because a small islet of jungle matter in the middle of the Coppename River was floating toward them, and, in that matter, just under the surface of the water, was a dangerously protruding tree trunk. It struck and pierced the boat of Achille just as it was passing in front of Batavia. Panic! A very large plank was torn from the hull and water entered freely. Everyone was bailing water. Achille, too, bailed water as if his life depended on it. And, in a way, it surely did. They were obliged to go toward the shore, and thus they headed to the dock at Batavia. A mere coincidence? They say that coincidence does not exist. But

“coincidence” is the word God uses when he wants to remain anonymous. Did it have to happen that Achille’s boat should get a serious leak so close to Batavia? Was it a coincidence or was it meant to be?

In any case, it was fortunate, because they hardly had time to reach Batavia’s dock, so huge was the hole caused by the tree trunk. The water entering was more than they could bail out. Many curious people were already watching, glad that finally something exciting was happening to disrupt the boredom of life at Batavia.

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“As we approached the jetty, a nauseating stench hit us in the face. We made it just in time. I asked the first person we met whether the administrator of this place was present. The one I addressed, a young man who, at first glance seemed quite normal and healthy, answered in a hoarse voice that the administrator had left Batavia for a few days, so that only the priest was present. If I wanted, he would be happy to take me to the priest’s house, which was next to the small church. To my question, ‘And, where is the priest?’ I got the answer, ‘Perhaps with a sick person or in the church.’ I felt angry that the only white man in the place did not even bother to come and greet another white man at the dock. Accompanied by this helpful man, I walked to the house next to the church. He wanted to carry the box containing the information about all the plantations I had visited, something I refused, fearing that I might be infected by such contact with a leper. A friendly Negro woman, nicely dressed, with a colored cap on her head, welcomed me warmly, opened the half-door and invited me in on behalf of the priest who was in the church or, she wasn’t sure, might be visiting a sick person in the village of the lepers. (pp. 245-246)

“Waiting for the priest, I looked around, somewhat afraid and alarmed. I was appalled by all the disfigured bodies and faces, the open wounds, and some with no hands, but most of all, by the nauseating smell, the disgusting stench that permeated everything and pervaded everywhere. I felt compelled to cover my nose with a handkerchief, but before I could, I started vomiting. Unimaginable, what a horrible smell! I was ashamed to soil the house of the priest, maintained so neatly, with my vomit, but it happened.

“And then, walking quietly, the priest arrived, greeting the people who approached him. Still nauseous, through tearful eyes just above the handkerchief I held in front of my nose, I saw again here in this place called Batavia, the very same small priest whom I had met during my first week in Paramaribo and later at my plantation, Rust en Vrede.

“He stepped in and, recognizing me, immediately greeted me warmly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world for two white people like us to meet and visit in a leper colony.

“He greeted me like an old acquaintance, and said: ‘I just passed by the dock and saw the big hole in your boat. You must be grateful to God that it happened right here, in front of this blessed place, Batavia. Otherwise you would not have survived. We have excellent craftsmen who can repair it; we lack only the materials. You can count on a stay of at least two to three days before continuing your journey. You are very welcome to be my guest. Have you ever been to a leper colony before?’

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“I shook my head, no. ‘This place always makes a bad impression on visitors who have not visited a leprosarium or leper colony in Europe or elsewhere,’ he said, ‘but I assure you that such an impression is not entirely fair. I do not envy the poor and sick, but many have found happiness and hope during their time here at Batavia, thanks to the work of my venerable predecessors. If you are now more accustomed to the smell here, I’ll show you around. That is,’ said the priest, ‘if you are feeling up to it. But first, tell me about the health of my fellow countryman, the overseer of your plantation, Rust en Vrede, Mr. Pel.’

"I told the priest that Mr. Pel had died of the fever, and that I had a cross placed on his grave at his express request. 'It is a pity,' the priest said, 'that he died without the means of grace offered by the Church, but I am pleased that you erected the sign of the Passion on your plantation, sir. I hope you will not be offended,' he continued, 'but I must now, as is my habit, retreat to the church for a while, where I will certainly remember Mr. Pel in my prayers as well.' I stood up and opened the door for the small man. The housekeeper called after him that she would prepare a delicious meal for him and for me. He did not turn around, but walked straight to the wooden church.

"When the priest could no longer hear her, the free Negro woman asked me: 'So, what do you think of this man? Don't you find him a little strange? I am a devout woman and have served this mission for a long time, sir, but I have never before seen or known a priest as good as this one. Would you believe that he gives his eggs to the lepers and his meat to the sick? It is impossible to offend someone like him. Don't you consider it somewhat exaggerated to go to pray at the church in the middle of the day? And do you think he will return within the hour, sir? If you think so, you are mistaken. He is on his knees before the altar, muttering as if time did not exist.'

"'And what this man does not do for the sick!', the housekeeper exclaimed somewhat resentfully. 'You must see it to believe it. Just recently, when I was on my way to the vegetable garden to fetch some vegetables, I saw the priest in a hut. And what was he doing there? Well, there he was, lying face down at the feet of a slave who had no hands and who could hardly speak. With a needle he was extracting chiggers from between the filthy toes of the man. I looked again, sir, and I could hardly believe my eyes. A priest! A priest from Holland, a white man, throwing himself at the feet of such a foul-smelling slave to remove the fleas from under his skin! I do not judge, sir, for I am just a simple woman, but this is going too far. It is as if this man doesn't know any classes or distinction of positions. No', she said muttering, 'his predecessors were cut from a different cloth. They fulfilled their obligations, yes, even more than duty required. But this one goes way too far in serving others.'"