

**REDEMPTORIST LAY COLLABORATION COMMISSION
ONGOING FORMATION AND FAITH-SHARING
BLESSED PETER DONDEERS**

Time Frame: 90 minutes

CENTRE OF BEAUTY:

- Mission Cross
- Cloth
- Icon or picture of Blessed Peter Donders, C.Ss.R.
- Candle
- Bible

HANDOUTS:

- "Blessed Peter Donders, C.Ss.R." (by Fr. Raymond Corriveau, C.Ss.R.)
- Prayer #8, from *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus* ("Blessed Peter Donders: Healer of Body and Soul"): adapted (Incorporated throughout)

MATERIALS:

- Name Tags (if needed)
- Pens/pencils
- Paper

NOTES:

In preparation for this session, copies of "Blessed Peter Donders, C.Ss.R." (by Fr. Raymond Corriveau, C.Ss.R.) are distributed to all participants, in order that they may read the article before coming together.

SATURDAY MORNING OR WEEKDAY EVENING SESSION

GATHERING and WELCOME

Experience– OPENING PRAYER– adapted from “**Blessed Peter Donders: Healer of Body and Soul**” (#8 in *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus*, by Terrence Moran, C.Ss.R.)

Leader: Jesus, our Redeemer, you took flesh and walked among us in search of the abandoned. Our brother, Peter Donders, spent his life in preaching your saving word to lepers, to slaves, to the poor and neglected. By his merits and prayers, stir up in us the same apostolic zeal, that we might place ourselves completely at the service of your Gospel. We ask this through you, who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, forever and ever. Amen.

Sung response: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Reader 1: Peter Donders, though already a priest, chose to become a Redemptorist, drawn by a desire to live and work in community. He wrote, “From the day on which, by God’s grace, I was received into the Congregation, I do not think I ever passed a day, or even an hour, without expressing great joy in my holy vocation and in community, except for the odd trial or temptation which I got over, by God’s grace.”

Sung response: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Reader 2: Peter Donders knew the discouragement that comes from hard work with meagre results. He wrote, “I have been working here for more than twenty years and what meagre results I have gained! If I were not convinced that God can do all things and that, in his infinite mercy, he can enlighten minds and change hearts, I would lose courage.”

Sung response: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Reader 3: Bishop Schaap, a Redemptorist and Donders’ bishop, wrote of him, “As a son of Saint Alphonsus, he had all the genial playfulness that distinguished his holy Father. He can never tell me enough how greatly edified he is to see the spirit of holy joy reign among us. How delightful it is to see Father Donders lighting up his pipe puffing away at recreation.”

Sung response: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Reader 4: With the voice of a prophet, Peter Donders spoke against the slave trade, “Woe! Woe to thee, Surinam, on the great day of accounting! Yes, woe! Woe! a thousand times to those Europeans– planters, slave holders, managers, overseers, and officials to whom this slave population is subject! Woe to those who make fortunes out of the sweat and blood of those unfortunate creatures who have God alone to defend them!”

Sung response: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Reader 5: In the Redemptorist Constitutions and Statutes, Blessed Peter Donders is described as, distinguished for his missionary service dedicated to the whole human person.” He did not merely preach. He dressed the sores of lepers with his own hands. He said that a school was just as important for a mission as a chapel. When he died, some of his people asked, “Now who will teach us to sing?”

Sung response: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Reflection: The facilitator encourages sharing in response to the Opening Prayer, in these or similar words:

As we prayed our Opening Prayer, remembering Blessed Peter Donders, some aspects of his life and his spirit were accented. Which of these spoke to you? You are invited to share these with the group.

Generalization:

Discuss the article which participants have read in preparation for this gathering: *Blessed Peter Donders, C.Ss.R.*. Some reflection questions were appended to the article. You might wish to use the following questions as a discussion guide:

1. What impressed you about Blessed Peter Donders as you read and reflected on this article?
2. What can we draw from the spirit and style of Peter Donders in ministry that we could apply to our own day?
3. As you read about Peter Donders, was anything affirmed for you? If so, what?
4. Did anything you read challenge you? If so, what was it?

Action: Name one thing that you will take home with you from tonight’s session.

CLOSING PRAYER (adapted from Terry Moran’s *In the Spirit of St. Alphonsus*)

Antiphonal Reading– Psalm 42

Side 1: Like the deer that yearns for running streams,
So my soul is yearning for you, my God.

Side 2: My soul is thirsting for God, the living God.
When can I enter and see the face of God?

Side 1: My tears have become my bread night and day,
and I hear it said all the day long, “where is your God?”

Side 2: I will remember these things as I pour out my soul,
How I would lead the joyous procession into the house of God,
With cries of gladness and thanksgiving, the multitude wild with joy.

Side 1: Why are you so sad, my soul? Why sigh within me?
Hope in God; for I will yet praise my Saviour and my God.

Side 2: My soul is downcast within me when I think of you,
From the land of Jordan and Mount Hermon, from the hill of Mizar.

Side 1: Deep is calling on deep as the waterfalls roar;

Your breakers and all your waves crashed over me.

Side 2: By day, the Lord will send loving kindness;
By night I will sing praise to the God of my life.

Side 1: I will say to God, my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me?
Why do I go mourning, oppressed by the foe?"

Side 2: With cries that pierce me to the heart, my enemies revile me,
Saying to me all day all day, "Where is your God?"

Side 1: Why are you oppressed, my soul— why cry within me?
Hope in God, I will praise my Saviour and my God.

Side 2: Glory to you, Source of all Being, Eternal Word, and Holy Spirit.

Side 1: As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Sung response: The Lord hears the cry of the poor. Blessed be the Lord.

Our Father

Sign of Peace

SOCIAL TIME

BLESSED PETER DONDEERS, C.Ss.R.

Fr. Raymond Corriveau, CSsR

God has always graced new beginnings in the history of his people with saintly and courageous persons, specially gifted to **give shape and life to the "word of God" for a particular need and time and place**. At least so it was throughout the story of Israel, in the Christian Church in New Testament times and in every new endeavour throughout the Church's life. We as Canadians trace our own faith history to the blood of **Jesuit martyrs**. At the very beginning of the colony we have **men and women** such as St Marguerite Bourgeois, Bl. Marie de l'Incarnation, Bl. Bishop Laval, Bl. Kateri Tekakwitha,¹ later St Marguerite d'Youville, and in the early part of this century Bl. Bro. André, all of whom gave shape to a new flourishing of Christian faith and life in a frontier land.

Similarly the beginnings of our own Redemptorist family were providentially marked by two canonized saints, the missionary founder Alphonsus Liguori and the mystic lay Brother, Gerard Majella. (An unusually large number of "venerables", men of proven virtue by the Church's rigid standards, also constituted that first primitive Redemptorist community). It was St. Clement Mary Hofbauer who spearheaded the expansion of the Redemptorists into northern Europe and again St. John Neumann who was the first Redemptorist professed in North America.

Among the first fruits of the Redemptorists to Surinam in Latin America (bordered by British Guyana, Brazil and French Guyana) was a man by the name of Peter Donders. (He is little known outside of Surinam and outside of the Redemptorists.) He spent the whole of his priestly life working among the people of Surinam. There is of course nothing very remarkable in that, except in the way he did it. His concern was for the most abandoned, the lepers, the slaves and Indians. He ministered to them in such a way that his memory is still sacred to

¹ The Jesuit Martyrs and Kateri Tekakwitha spanned present-day borders between Canada and the USA.

many people in Surinam today.

The inspiration of Peter Donders's life and ministry induced the Church to acclaim him "blessed". Pope John Paul II presided at his solemn beatification in Rome in the Spring of 1982, coincidentally the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Redemptorists. Thereby the Church assigned a feast day and mass in his honour and recognized the extraordinary virtue and quality of his life, acknowledging it to have been a true and worthy witness to the Truth of the Gospel.

Peter Donders has been called a "Rebound Redemptorist." The Redemptorists turned him away as a young man when he came to them. Thirty years later and across an ocean, the Redemptorists Also, one of the witnesses for his cause described him as "another Cure of Ars." As in the case of St. John Vianney, the course of Peter's life followed a routine that occasioned little comment, official or otherwise. After all simple people are not mentioned in official despatches and newspapers. The two men are alike in the poverty of their home life, their lack of schooling, their extraordinary resolution in the journey toward the priesthood and their entire dedication to routine pastoral duties. What the Cure of Ars did in an obscure village in France Peter Donders did in the little known country of Surinam.

Early Years

Peter was born on October 27, 1809 in Tilburg, Holland. He was the son of a cottage weaver. Materially the Donders family was very poor. Its wealth consisted in a deep and humble faith in God. Though a vocation must always be a deep mystery, it seems to be there that Peter's vocation was born and nourished. Peter writes of himself in 1874: "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." Even if we allow that this is an old man recalling his childish aspirations in the light of a full life's work, we have to credit him with an extraordinary singleness of purpose. We are also told that from his childhood he was given to prayer and that he had a special devotion to Mary, to whom he attributed his vocation to the priesthood and religious life. He also tended to see his escape from compulsory military service from ages eighteen to twenty-two on the basis of frail health in the context of God's

divine call and as a manifestation of his special providence.

Peter's mother died when he was seven years old and his father remarried. Probably around the age of twelve Peter's schooling was cut short so that he could take up the weaver's trade to help support the family. It was clearly a home in which poverty and hard work were inescapable. In his free time he helped teach catechism in the parish.

Peter was twenty-two when he was admitted to the minor seminary (the equivalent of our high school). It appears that the shortage of domestic service due to military conscription worked in his favour, overcoming problems concerning his age, inadequate education and health. He was allowed to enter as a working student. This meant that apart from having to attend classes he also worked as a servant at the seminary. He was decidedly one of the lesser lights in his class. The fact that he was so much older than the other boys and having to work for his primary education made him the obvious butt of jokes and teasing. One mildly deriding nick-name his juniors gave him was "holy Peerke" because of his austerity and prayer life during these years. But his kindness and patience eventually seems to have won his fellow students over.

In 1837, when he was already 27 years old he was able to proceed to the major seminary. The problem of financing his studies in Theology again cropped up at this time. Peter also desired to be a foreign missionary. These were among some of the factors which prompted the president of the seminary to suggest that he try a religious order. Peter tried the Jesuits, the Redemptorists and the Franciscans. He was refused by all three. He was either too old, or his education was inadequate, or he was considered not to have the talents suitable for the particular style of life, or health was a factor. At Liege, the Redemptorist Father Bernard Hafkenscheid acted as interpreter for Peter and the Belgian provincial, Frederick de Held. De Held knew no Dutch and Donders knew no French. Neither of them knew that the future held some surprises when de Held turned Donders away.

With the financial support of his old parish priest and one of his professors, Peter began to study philosophy and theology at Herlaar, Holland in the fall of 1837. He showed himself more

adept in his theological studies than he had in Latin and the Humanities, and it became apparent that he was especially gifted in preaching. One of his fellow students during these years describes him as gentle, amiable, obedient, a person of great devotion to Mary.

In 1839, Bishop Grooff from Surinam came to the seminary and appealed for some students to come to minister in the Surinam vicariate, manned by himself and one other priest. Peter applied for the mission. Ordained in June 1841, he set sail for Surinam on August 1, 1842. He left his homeland never to return.

Early Years in Surinam

In the welcoming address for Fr. Donders, Bishop Grooff spoke of Peter bearing an "iron cross." He knew how demanding life in Surinam was going to be for the young priest. Surinam consists of a narrow coastal strip. The hinterland in those days was nothing but jungle. To penetrate it one had literally to cut a path through it. The climate was torrid, hot and moist. The people of the colony were a mixture of races and nationalities. As a result of slavery, the poor were anti-colonialist and anti-white. Many had settled deep in the jungle where no missionaries had reached them. The slaves were treated no better than animals. Donders was horrified at their condition and longed to see slavery abolished. This was at last decreed in 1863. The plantation owners were antagonistic toward priests because of their concern for the state of the slaves. Bishop Grooff did not want Fr. Donders to have any illusions about the life and work which awaited him. In response to the bishop's address, Fr. Donders intoned the creed. The article "for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven...for our sake he was crucified..." for him included the slave, the lepers, the Indians and the other forsaken people of the little known colony of Surinam. In his profession of faith in the same Lord Jesus Christ Peter found all the strength he needed to accept the "iron cross" extended to him.

Father Donders worked in the city of Paramariba as parish priest for 14 years. He mastered the spoken language (a form of pigeon English) and became acclimatized. His day would begin at 5:00 a.m. with meditation, followed by eucharist and thanksgiving. Then followed the business of a zealous parish priest's day: catechism for the children, visiting the sick and the

homes of parishioners and classes for adult catechumens. In the heat of the day the people stayed in so he went out. He was sure to find the people at home. He persistently sought out the sick and the lost sheep. He took time for himself to read and pray before the Blessed Sacrament. He also spent time each evening with his fellow priest, Bishop Grooff.

During these 14 years Peter regularly visited some twelve coffee, cotton and cane plantations along the rivers, travelling by tent-boat. A fellow missionary described these trips: "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." Sometimes the managers of the plantations refused to let him hold services. Other times his persistence won out. He would set up a shed or a hut. The Negro slaves would congregate. In the stuffy hut Father Donders spent hours instructing, baptizing, confessing, performing marriages, offering Mass. His winning ways and holiness gradually broke down barriers so that the plantation managers came to consider his visits a privilege.

In 1856, when Fr. Donders was 47, he was transferred to Batavia, the site of a leper colony, deep within the jungle on the Coppename river. For 27 years he showed extraordinary devotion to this work 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. To the poor he gave the shirt off his back and went to any lengths to get money for them. One of the lepers spoke in this way: "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 teachings." In him, many of them knew compassion and acceptance, the comfort of experiencing that they were not totally abandoned.

Where did Peter find the strength to bear up to the strain of the ceaseless suffering which he confronted in Batavia? It was in prayer, penance and confident faith in God, whose love was able to reach these poor people through his humble efforts. It is reported that he spent many hours in prayer kneeling before a large crucifix in the graveyard.

The Redemptorist

In 1865, Pius IX entrusted the mission vicariate of Surinam to the Redemptorists to adequately serve the needs of the mission. On Nov 1, 1866, the only two remaining secular priests in Surinam, Peter Donders and John Romme entered the Congregation as novices. For Peter this was not just an impulse brought on by the presence of the Redemptorist missionaries to avoid being an "outsider." Peter writes: "I took the first opportunity to go from Batavia to the city to ask the Bishop (J.B. Swinkeis, C.Ss.R.) to receive me into the Congregation. For a long time, especially after having read the life of our Holy Father written by Father Bossers, 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 years."

The Redemptorist rule states that the main apostolic purpose of its members is to work for the most abandoned. This was something Peter Donders knew something about. He had dedicated all his mental, physical and spiritual energies to them over the past 25 years. Fr. Donders was able to consolidate his vocation to serve the most abandoned by joining this religious community whose rule and style of life was geared toward serving that end.

Two months after his profession on June 24, 1867, Fr. Donders was sent back to Batavia with another Father as companion and superior to make up the small apostolic cell in the leper colony. Now he was able to expand his apostolate to the Arrowak and Carib Indians in the jungle that surrounded Batavia on three sides. A man in his late fifties, he set out on this difficult task, to the lasting amazement of his confreres. It was to become one of the most fruitful areas of his missionary career. The Indians were nomadic and travelled in small bands from place to place. The terrain was rough. Peter travelled by boat, by canoe, on foot through

the forests and sometimes chest-deep in swamps. He often slept in a hammock in the forest.

At the age of 60 he took up the accordion to play for the Indians. And he did reach them. They grew to admire him and listen to him. Through him they learned to know of the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ and the Church. Many were received into the Church. It is a tribute to his unflagging zeal that practically all the Indians of Surinam are today Catholic Christians. During his visits to the Indians he was also able to be of some service to the bush Negroes. At the end of his life he wrote: "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."

In February of 1883, at the age of 74, Fr. Donders was transferred to the Central Mission House in Paramaribo. Both there and in Coronia where he was sent 9 months later, he had the opportunity of living and working in a larger residentially established Redemptorist community. We can surmise that religious community life must have occasioned some strain for a man who had ministered alone for 25 years of his priesthood. However, he expresses only appreciation for the support and companionship of community life: "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 some many years." One of his confreres relates that the transfer in 1883 was "on account of his desire for the community life." While he was apostolically active during these years, the regularity of life lived in community was for him spiritually refreshing. Of his work during this time his superior wrote: "There is no hardship, no privation too great for him once there is a question of God's glory for the salvation of neighbour."

In November of 1885, Fr. Donders was sent back to Batavia to replace a priest returning to Holland to work with and care for Fr. John who had himself contracted leprosy. At 76, though his old programme was now beyond him, he continued to tend the needs of the lepers. Just three months before he died he went on his last expedition to the Indians by canoe. On Dec. 31, 1886, Fr. Donders preached for the last time in Batavia.

During his last illness, the Protestant doctor who attended him said: "Father Donders is the first, and will surely be the last one I shall ever see so perfectly resigned to the Will of God." Peter Donders died on Friday, Jan. 14, 1887 at 3:30 p.m. among his lepers as he had predicted. He was 77 years old. He was buried at the foot of the cemetery cross where he had so often prayed at night.

The memory of Peter Donder's inspiring dedication and love for God and the most abandoned continued as a living force for good among his people in Surinam. In 1900 the process for his canonization was initiated. In 1945 Pius XII declared him "venerable." On April 11, 1978, the Congregation for the Causes of Saints declared miraculous the cure of Louis John Westland from osteomyelitis by his intercession. In 1982, Pope John Paul II declared him "blessed."

Life in the Spirit

First a note about Peter Donders, Redemptorist. While he was in novitiate Peter wrote a friend in Holland: "At my age I've actually become a Redemptorist. And in Surinam! I simply cannot tell you my joy and happiness!" Seven years later he wrote to the same priest: "From the day that I was received into the Congregation I do not think that I ever passed a day or even an hour without experiencing great joy in my holy vocation." A year later he wrote: "I can never thank God enough for having called me to the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer. May the God of all goodness grant me to live as a true Redemptorist and to persevere until death." After his death, the chronicler who wrote up an account of his life and had been his superior and confrere underlined his **love of prayer, his love of mortification; and his love of neighbour and zeal for souls.**

Regarding his **prayer life**, it might be of comfort for us to know that he found mental prayer difficult. Apparently his prayer was much more frequently vocal than mental. He prayed ejaculations throughout the day. He depended on the frequent recitation of the rosary, spiritual reading and the use of prayer books to arouse and nourish his devotion. To his superior he wrote: "If you ask me whether I am dry or fervent in prayer, from time to time I am fervent, but dryness is my habitual state. The best I can do is humble myself before God at my inability to think a good thought without his grace; or, following your advice, I go through the stations of

the cross mentally. This is what I generally do during the evening meditation." The mark of his prayer was long-standing fidelity. We are told that besides the meditations and prayers of the Church and the rule he spent an hour in prayer morning and evening before the Blessed Sacrament. How much time he spent in prayer when alone in Batavia or travelling in a tent-boat is known only to heaven.

Certainly anyone who pursues a goal as singlemindedly as Peter Donders did lives a **mortified life**. His goal was intense union with God and a heart totally on fire for the salvation of souls. No obstacle was too great, no sacrifice too heavy. Peter's spirituality is marked by his patient acceptance of the unpredictable demands of daily life and duty, the trials and disappointments, the diminishments inevitable in a committed religious and apostolic life. His asceticism was that proper to a shepherd of souls, renouncing his own conveniences, seeking what is profitable for others and not for himself. That aspect of "dying to self" we can understand today even though we fear its demands. But Peter's superior spoke also at his funeral of "that daily fast, of continual abstinence from meat, the harsh scourging of his body for years on end which did not prevent him being always in good health and reaching the age of seventy-seven." From this distance in time, suffice it to say that these forms of self-denial and penance were yet another expression of the process of mortifying egoism and deepening charity for God and neighbour. Though we might quibble with some of its forms, certainly we have in Peter's life the living realization that total commitment to Christ is total abnegation of self-centredness. We must all "bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame." (2 Cor 4:10).

Finally, a **burning zeal for souls** brought Peter Donders to Surinam and kept him there for more than 44 years working for the poorest and most abandoned. It made him a true apostle of Jesus Christ crucified in his heart and seeking only that his Living Easter be known and loved. That zeal is shown by the innumerable obstacles and set-backs on his journeys, on the plantations and among the Indians where visible results were often so meagre. The people of Surinam, Protestants, Jews and Catholics were in accord in esteeming him as a man of God, not for his outward gifts or talents, but for his goodness and for sacrificing himself for the most abandoned.

The chronicler of the short account of Peter's life ends with these words: "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."

Prayer

God, loving Father,

You are honoured and praised in the memory of Peter Donders,
your loving servant, who served you so well in his devoted care for people
most abandoned, in greatest need, in Surinam.

May the memory and example of your blessed servant, Peter Donders
inspire others to follow in his footsteps, in serving you with tender compassion and care
in those most abandoned and in greatest need, today and always. Amen.

Raymond Corriveau C.Ss.R.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION...

1. What impressed you about Blessed Peter Donders as you read and reflected on this article?
2. What can you draw from the spirituality of Blessed Peter Donders that you could apply to your own lives or our own day?
3. As you read about Donders, was anything affirmed for you? If so, what?
4. Did anything you read challenge you? If so, what was it?
5. Who are the lepers of our day? Where do you imagine Donders would walk if he were physically among us again?